

# FRACTURED FAIRY TALES

# Fractured Fairy Tales

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Edited by Catherine Stovall



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Edited by Catherine Stovall

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The Maid and the Outlaw by Zoe Adams Frosted Hearts by Leah D.W.

Luvia by Stephen T. De Marino

The One and Only by Victoria Kinnaird Pixie by Pyxi Rose

No Turning Back by Nicole Daffurn Weather Vain by K.C. Finn

Goldie by Samantha Kettelman

Curse of the Witch by Nicole Daffurn Lorelei: The Nightingale by Catherine Stovall Wayward

Place by Pyxi Rose

A Pleasant Surprise by Nicole Daffurn Raise by Lexi Ostrow

The Singing Bones by Sinead MacDughlas Ivory Tower by Cecilia Clark

The Innkeeper's Daughter by Andrea L. Staum Hidden City of the Sea by Jeannette Joyal Out  
of the Hat and into Wonderland by Nicole Daffurn Echo by N.C. Thomas

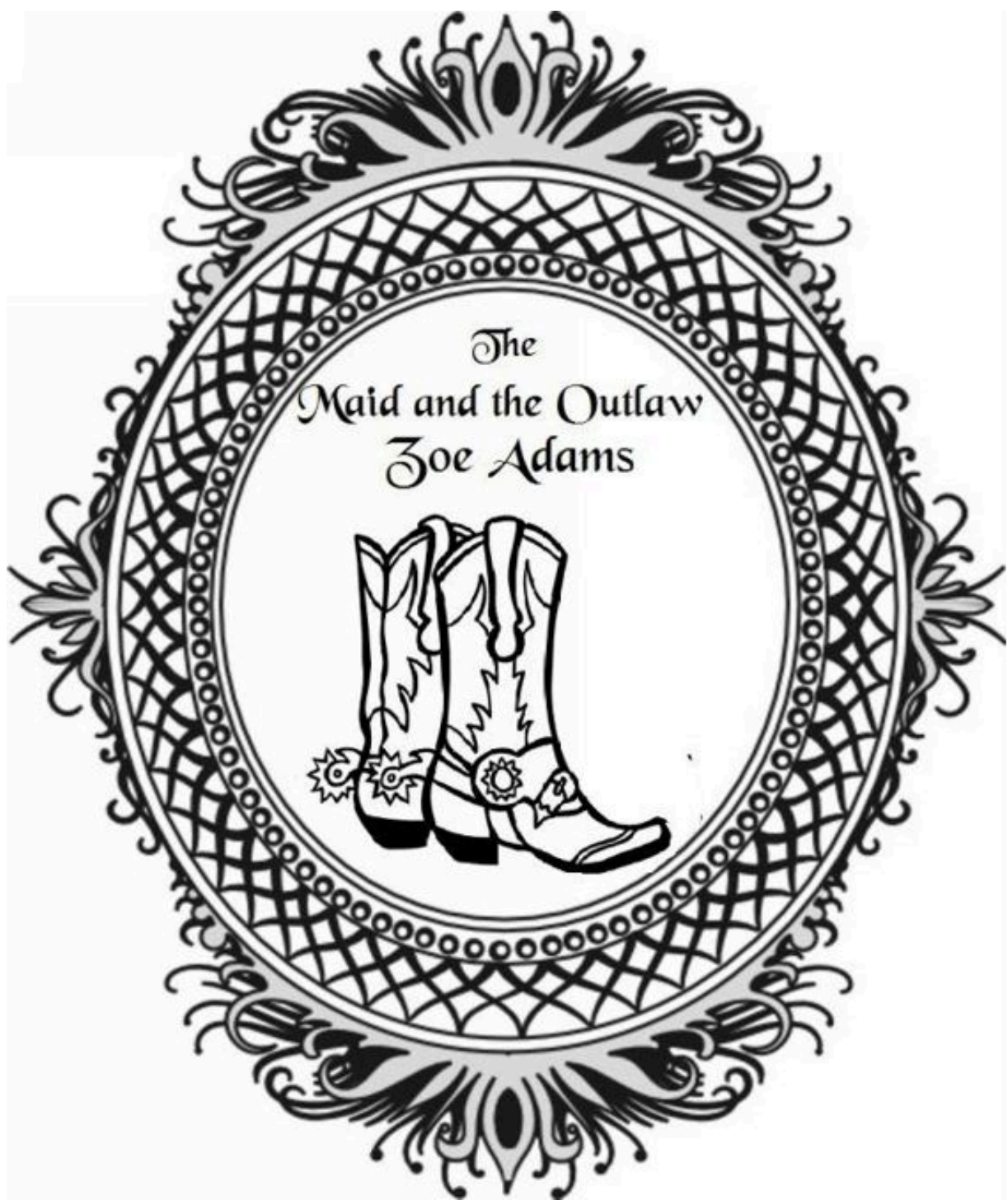
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Prince Charming by Jennifer Raygoza Bloody Red by Jade Heart

The King's Wizard (Excerpt) by Lillian MacKenzie Rhine

This book is dedicated to our readers.  
Thank you for making our dreams come true.





# **The Maid and the Outlaw**

## By Zoe Adams

\*This story is written in UK English\*

The sun was setting on the Cinder family homestead. It stood tall and proud, the faint smell of fresh paint still lingering in the air. The lower windows gleamed, while the soft glow of candlelight came from the upper.

Freshly cut logs were thrown haphazardly in a wicker basket on the wooden porch. An old blanket was tossed on the railing. Occasionally, the frayed ends lifted, but fell back in a lethargic state. The grass was in sore need of a cut, while the flowers that had grown previously had been picked earlier that day.

To the back of the house, were the newly built stables, where the family horses were tethered. A murder of crows croaked mournfully from the eaves, before taking flight into the branches of the largest trees. Dust motes circled the air.

Mrs. Cinder lay on the marriage bed, the curtains drawn. Her face was pale and sweat beads gathered on her forehead. She clutched a white lace handkerchief to her mouth as she coughed and spluttered. Small blood spots appeared on the handkerchief as she pulled it away. Her husband sat beside her, a bowl of steaming broth on his lap. He mopped his wife's forehead and squeezed her hand.

"Darling, my vision's blurring. Send her in. I need to see her," she said weakly.

Mr. Cinder moved the broth onto the bedside drawer. His wife coughed once more and his heart ached. Her illness had crept upon them as suddenly as an Apache attack, and he had tried his hardest to keep the family together—for his Ella's sake.

Their daughter peered around the door. Her hair hung around her face in angelic blonde ringlets. Her blue eyes were wide with fear.

“Mama!” Ella cried, rushing to the bedside.

The mother coughed once more, grasping wildly for her daughter’s hand. When flesh met flesh, her heart leapt lightly.

“My dear girl, live a good life. The Lord will be with you, always, as shall I. Heaven awaits me. I hear the angels singing. Promise me, daughter of mine.”

“I promise, Mama.”

The mother drew her last breath and passed on, to the cries of her family.

A few days later, the service took place. The heat was unbearable in the churchyard. Many of the townsfolk came to offer their condolences and best wishes, from the livery to the bank. Ella dutifully shook each hand that came her way, and when the funeral came to an end, she remained standing by her mother’s resting place. Her thin body racked with sobs. Her father’s hand on her shoulder made her stiffen suddenly. When she gazed up at his shaven face and hollow eyes, she was reminded of the promise she had made.

She slid her hand into her father’s, and they stood silently, mourning the passing of Mrs Cinder.



“Papa, what’s happening?”

As Ella returned from the general store, she was puzzled to see bags and boxes littering the usually empty hallway. When she entered the sitting room, she was shocked to find another woman sat in her mother’s armchair.

The woman was robust, clad in a dark velveteen frock. A bonnet sat in her lap. Her bottom lip protruded in an unattractive fashion. Ella tried not to stare.

“Ah, my dear, it’s a pleasure to meet you. Your father has told me all about you.” She smiled.

“I’m afraid he’s never mentioned you, ma’am,” Ella said, curtsying politely.

“Never mind about that now. I’d like you to meet my girls.” She clapped her hands twice. A pair of girls wearing matching dresses, and feathers in their hair stepped inside. They had glassy eyed stares as they stood diligently behind their mother.

“I know you’ve had a hard time, my dear. But everything’s going to be fine. Just fine.”

And so life was fine... for a few days at least. Being helpful and dutiful, Ella went out of her way to assist with tasks, however small. From hanging the washing in the yard, to mucking out the stables, she gave a smile and began to work.

Sadly, the stepmother had other plans. She took Ella’s bonnets and fine dresses, and replaced them with dirty ripped bandannas and plain dresses made of scratchy material. Turfed from her room, she was sent to sleep in the attic, amongst cobwebs and insects. Often, she couldn’t stay awake long enough, and was found asleep by the hearth. They taunted her, calling her ‘Cinderella’ and from that day on. She had become the family maid.

“Why, Ella Ella Cinderella, don’t dirty up my kitchen! Take your dinner to the porch. Don’t step back in until it’s gone and you’re clean!” the stepmother would say on an evening.

“I hope my dress is cleaned for tonight. The men would hate to see me in something so ugly and vile!” the sisters would moan in unison, as Ella

fixed hemlines and adjusted sequins. For her two stepsisters often visited the saloon in the hopes of snaring a rich farmer or catching the eye of a passing traveller.

One summer evening, Mr. Cinder announced that he was to travel out of town for a few days. The stepmother made a fuss, but when she was promised a gift, her anger turned to excitement. When he asked his stepdaughters what they would like, they proclaimed the finest dresses and beautiful jewellery.

When he asked Ella what she would like, she was preoccupied with the skinning of rabbit with a Bowie knife. Asking her again, she jerked out of her focus and nearly sliced into her finger. Surrounded by scraps of fur, she thought about the impossible and all the things she would love. To have her mother back would be wonderful, but she knew she couldn't bring the dead back to life.

"I don't need anything, Papa. Just travel safe and come back for me."

The stagecoach he rode home on was filled with gifts for his family. Jewellery, hats, dresses—all packed and wrapped neatly. He patted his jacket pocket, a small smile on his lips.

When he arrived at the homestead, his stepdaughters were waiting on the porch excitedly. They eagerly unwrapped their gifts, high pitched squeals escaping their mouths. They draped their fine jewels around each other's throats with glee. His wife paraded around in her new bonnet, proclaiming she would rival every woman in town.

In the fields, he found his Ella. She had his old Winchester rifle in the crook of her arm. He watched as she loaded it carefully, raising and cocking it to the left of a cluster of trees. She squeezed the trigger.

The shot rang out clear over the fields. As the smoke eventually cleared, she lowered the rifle. Heading into the grasses, she returned with a rabbit

dangling by its ears.

“Nice shot.”

“The darn critters have been eating our crops,” she sighed and pushed her hair further under her bandana. “Welcome back, Pa.”

He reached into his pocket, pulling out a small leather pouch. It rattled as he shook it. As she opened the pouch, her mouth created a perfect ‘O’.

“They’re only bullets,” he said softly, and turned away from her.

Her thanks stuck in her throat, as she watched him walk away. Hanging her head, she made her way home, the rabbit slung over her shoulder. She scuffed her boots across the hard ground, kicking up dust as she went. Replacing the rifle in the closet, she strung the rabbit up in the kitchen. Seeing that she was alone, she headed to the stables with purpose. Working quickly and quietly, a horse was saddled and ready to go.

Digging her heels sharply into the mare’s side, she galloped out of the open stable doors, through the homestead gates and headed towards the town. The mare’s hooves sent clouds of dust into the air, and Ella tugged her dress collar up to cover her mouth. She thundered down Main Street, ignoring the people who stared openly at the sight. She was sure she looked like a wild savage as she urged the horse towards the graveyard. The light wind whipped her face, and she felt all her cares disappear.

She pulled the reins sharply, sending the mare teetering onto her back legs. Holding firm, Ella calmed her before, gently trotting towards the railings. Sliding from the saddle, Ella tied the horse to the hitching rail to the left of the entryway. She gazed up at the moon breaking the night sky that had crept upon her and sighed. The mare nudged her shoulder urging her forwards, and Ella made her way to her mother’s grave. She started to tidy the slowly wilting flowers that she had laid here only a day earlier, but the tears that fell from her eyes obscured her vision.

When Ella returned to the homestead, her stepsisters were already home from the saloon. They were flouncing about the sitting room, gesturing wildly with folding fans.

“Ella Ella Cinderella, there’s a new arrival in town. He was in the saloon tonight. And my Jesus, he sure is handsome. We’re going back tomorrow, so you better make sure that the dresses from Pa are ready!” the elder stepsister said.

The next day, Ella set to work even earlier than usual. She pressed the new dresses for her stepsisters and shined their shoes. As she polished their rings and necklaces, she felt her hopes rise. Maybe this would be the night she could go out too. She’d only passed the outside, and the tales her stepsisters came back with only ignited her fire.

When the sisters were getting dressed, Ella stood shaking in the doorway and made her suggestion. Her sisters laughed, laughs so unkind it was as if a rattlesnake had bitten their vocal chords.

“Ella Ella Cinderella, have you seen how dirty you are? Like we’d take you dancing in that tatty old thing!” The younger sister plucked a loose thread from Ella’s sleeve.

The stepmother made her way into the bedroom, a case of polished jewellery in her hands. She sighed. “Dirty dishes won’t clean themselves.”

Adjusting the sleeves of her dress, Ella headed outside, tossing pebbles at the mice that scurried in her wake. She hooked the rope into the iron rings and firmly tied it to the handle of the bucket. She let it fall into the darkness below, where it splashed upon contact. She began to pull. Once, twice, thrice, and she paused for a breath. Then she started again. And again. As the bucket reached the top, she pulled it carefully to the well top, unhooked the rope, and started back. Water occasionally slipped over the side and dotted her arms, but her determination kept her strong.



In the kitchen, she scrubbed each dish until they sparkled bright. Holding the heavy iron cook pot made her arms ache, but she kept going, even when the water soaked through her dress. She rubbed down the surfaces, and by the time she was finished, her stepmother stood in the doorway, ready to inspect.

Ella stood by the stove, ringing the cloth in her hands, waiting for the answer.

The stepmother looked over each dish, smirking as she did so.

“Have you got a dress? Do you know how to dance? Feed the animals, and I might reconsider.”

Swallowing hard, Ella hurried out to the stables. The doors were unlocked, and when she checked the feed barrel, she was dismayed.

*Nearly empty. Darn it!*

Sighing, she pushed her sleeves back, and climbed onto an upturned box. She reached for the shelf where the new sacks were stored and shrieked as one toppled onto her, knocking her from the box. Wind escaped her lungs. The bag split. Grain spilled. Swearing under her breath, she leapt over the sack and started to unbolt the horses.

At the sight of the food, the horses started forwards immediately. Taking what they wanted in great amounts, Ella started to pull them back. Feeling proud of her idea, she put the animals to bed. No grains were left behind. Hauling the sack to the barrel, she poured in the remaining feed.

Wiping her dusty hands on her dress, she entered the house. Her stepfamily stood waiting in the hall. The sisters giggled behind sequined fans, and the stepmother stood with her hands on her hips.

“You can’t come. It’s as simple as that. Maybe another time, Ella Ella Cinderella!”

As her family stalked away, high laughter mingled with bird calls. Ella felt the tears glide along her cheeks. Brushing them away furiously, she stamped to her attic bedroom. Snatching up the old house broom, she furiously beat away the dangling cobwebs, but fury still welled within her. Hands shaking, she threw it into a dusty corner, when it slammed into something.

Curious, Ella hunted for the broom. It lay on the top of a dusty trunk. She blew away the filth that had settled, coughing as she did so. Rattling the lock a few times, she sighed. It wouldn't budge. She slumped onto the floor and gave it a sharp kick. The lock shattered.

When it creaked open, Ella was shocked.

"Mama," she whispered.

Inside were her mother's old clothes. There was everything from frocks, to blouses, to long skirts. They still held that soft fragrance of prairie bluebells that she had worn. So many memories...

Without thinking, she took a smart pale blouse and rumpled skirt. Thoughts began to race around her head as she dressed. What if she was recognised? Eschewing the thoughts, she scrubbed the dirt from her face, and pinned her hair atop her head. She also took a pair of her father's old spectacles and a pair of clean boots.

The walk to town was broken only by the sound of crickets chirping softly. The moon occasionally slid behind a cloud, and the wind brushed her face, almost in a lovers caress— not that she'd had any lovers to speak of.

When she arrived at the saloon, she was terrified. Drunken shouts filled her ears, and she felt like turning tail and running home. Swallowing her fear, she pushed open the doors.

Decorated with paintings and animal heads, it looked like her father's study—except her father didn't have drunken women and card playing men

inside. Some figures stood around roulette tables, including her stepmother and sisters.

Leant against the bar, was indeed, a handsome stranger. A tanned face, with a creeping five o'clock shadow, his body was taut and muscled. He sipped whiskey from a glass, his eyes on the dance floor. He moved his Stetson forward on his head, as if he didn't want to be disturbed.

Confidently, Ella started across to the bar, when the man jerked the Stetson backwards. His eyes fixed on her, and she felt her heart leap.

*By the Lord Jesus, he's an outlaw! And he sure is handsome!*

She watched as he tucked his thumbs inside the belt loops of his jeans and made his way towards her, with languid movements.

"Care to dance, ma'am?" he asked.

Ella danced all night. Many other gentlemen came towards her, but the handsome stranger steered her away, with a, "She's my partner, friend."

As the night carried on, Ella watched her stepmother talking to her daughters behind her hand. Suddenly, her head jerked towards the outlaw. Making an excuse about an elderly family member, Ella took her hand back, and set out to return home.

As she started down the road, she heard the stranger call after her.

"I didn't catch your name, ma'am!"

Ella picked up her skirts and ran. Her cheeks were flushed and perspiration began to gather under her arms.

The next day, when all her tasks were done, and her family was gone for the evening, Ella climbed the stairs with great speed. She flung open the lid of the trunk, and this time, she rummaged thoroughly until she found what she wanted.

When she entered the saloon, with a spray of feathers pinned behind her left ear and a dress that rose above her knees in exciting colours of red and

black, she felt giddy with excitement.

And there the outlaw was. That evening, his pistols were prominently on display, and he had a bandana draped around his neck. When he spotted her, he grinned, took her hand and swept her onto the dance floor.

Ella couldn't help but smile when she noticed her stepfamily gawping from the bar. When other's came to dance, the outlaw would cock one of his pistols and growl, "She's my partner, friend."

When her time was drawing to a close, Ella slipped away, when he was procuring drinks. As she headed home, she heard the saloon doors swing open. Dashing between buildings, Ella hid herself away, taking a back route home. She had just reached the attic, when she heard the others return.

On the third night, when the stepsisters were determined to catch the outlaw's eye, Ella went back to the trunk.

When the saloon doors swung open, she felt every pair of eyes follow her movements. Dressed in a pair of old jeans tucked into tan leather boots, her spurs clicked against the wooden floor. Her shirt and waistcoat fitted tight around her bosom, and her Winchester was slung across her back. Complete with her own Stetson atop a tumbling mass of curls, she hoped to rival the outlaw himself.

The outlaw choked on his drink when he spotted her. Ella grinned, and walked over, her hips swaying. She held out a hand, and he took it instantly.

Everyone followed their movements and brave men came towards them.

"She's my partner, friend."

Ella felt abhorrence burn into her body from various haters as she made her way outside. She raised a hand in goodbye to the outlaw, and headed along Main Street, her heart beating in time to her spurs.

Galloping hooves came towards her, and Ella spun, unhooking the Winchester. The outlaw was riding towards her, bent low over the neck of

his horse. Ella couldn't move fast enough—he opened an arm wide and scooped her into his arms. She struggled in his tight grip, until she tumbled headlong into the dirt. Buttons flew from her waistcoat. Her right boot slid off in the tussle, and without a backwards glance, Ella dashed through a narrow alley, where his horse couldn't follow. She ran as fast as she could, until she reached the homestead. She threw herself through the door and leant against it, breathing heavily.

The next day, the outlaw began making visits to the homes of the town, in search of his femme fatale. Eventually, he rode his steed to the Cinder homestead. When he knocked on the door, Ella was in the kitchen, plucking feathers from a chicken.

His voice reverberated in the hall: "I believe a lady lost this last night."

Mr. Cinder watched his stepdaughters glance at each other, before a small scuffle broke out over who would try it on first. Ella peered from the doorway, as the elder sister took the boot. She started to push her foot into it, but she squealed as it got stuck at her ankle. Sighing in frustration, the stepmother started to push even harder, until the sister's face turned a deathly pallor.

The second sister snatched the boot off of her. She slipped it on and squealed with delight.

"It fits! It fits Pa! Oh Ma, I'm going to be married now!"

She gave the outlaw a broad smile and dashed for his arms. Unfortunately, the boot thumped forwards and the sister took a tumble. She twisted her ankle as she landed and tears sprang to her eyes.

The outlaw ran a hand over his stubble. She was there somewhere, he darn well knew it.

"Do you have any other daughters at all, sir?"

“There’s my first born. Ella. But I’m afraid that she’s busy at the moment—”

“I want to see her, sir.”

Ella nearly hit the cupboard as she backed up anxiously. Her father stuck his head around the door, and gave a thin smile of hope. He ushered her into the sitting room. The bird thumped onto the floor, feathers scattering everywhere.

She refused to meet the outlaw’s curious gaze, as she rubbed her hands on her already dirty skirt. She gave a clumsy curtsy and took the boot that he now held in his hands.

She slipped it on and rotated her foot. It fit perfectly. She peeked through her lashes at the outlaw’s growing smile. Her stepmother was spluttering nonsense words, and the sisters had started shouting.

Hands began clapping. She spun to see her father smiling warmly.

“Excuse me... Please.”

Ella rummaged in the kitchen cupboard, where she found her other boot. She’d stashed it beneath a pile of rags and stained linen, somewhere she knew her father or step-family wouldn’t dare go. As she held it in her hands for a minute, a grin as stupid as one of her stepsisters spread. She slipped her boot on, and took the rifle that hung inside. She ran a hand lovingly along the barrel, before hooking it onto her back.

When she returned, every jaw in the room hit the floor. The stepmother was still chattering awkwardly, while the sisters were sobbing uncontrollably in the armchair, holding their ailing feet.

The outlaw strode towards her, and pulled her into his tight grip. He stared into her eyes, searching for her very soul. His lips sought hers, and he kissed her with an intensity that burned. She kissed him back, unafraid of

what her father or her miserable old stepmother thought about her. No longer did she felt like a scullery maid, but a true Cinder woman.

They walked hand in hand from the house, where a great beast of a horse was tied to the gate post. Her relations followed, no matter how weak or injured. They grunted, “Ella Ella Cinderella,” like the buffalos in the further fields.

The outlaw slipped his hand from hers to untie his horse. A black stallion. Wild and untamed, like the outlaw himself. He climbed into the saddle, offering his hand to Ella. With one foot in the stirrup, she bunched her skirt above her knees, all manners forgotten. She nestled behind the outlaw, breathing in his scent of alcohol and cigarettes.

Ripping her bandana from her head, she threw it into the dirt, and her curls sprung wild and free. She swiped the outlaws Stetson and angled in jauntily. She waved to her beaming father, and her sulking stepfamily, while her other hand kept a firm grip on the outlaw.

Ella slapped the stallion’s backside. They reared into the air, the horse’s bray drowning out the sobs of the sisters.

“Yee haa!” she cried, as they galloped into the sunshine.





# Frosted Hearts

Leah D.W.

The black envelope sat atop her pillow, crisp and clean, with a white wax seal. Ellie stood in her bedroom's doorway, one hand on her racing heart and wide eyes only on that envelope. No one had brought it to her country home and no one had placed it neatly in her room. The letter never came in such a mundane manner. No, it only appeared when the receiver was worthy of attending *the* event—an event of a lifetime.

Ellie swallowed her scream as she dived for her bed and grabbed the letter, scattering her peach and cream pillows and wrinkling the pale pink blanket draped across her bed's neatly made covers. She didn't care; not about pristine bedcovers or lemon fragranced pillows. All that mattered was the letter, that single note that she clutched to her chest.

“Keep calm, El,” she spoke to herself, eyes shut tightly. “This isn't a dream. Finally, I can go. I can go!” and then she squealed while hugging the letter and kicking her legs up in the air.

Naturally, her brother was the first to arrive at her door at hearing her excitement. Cool and always calm eyes of ice blue peered inside her room and after scanning the boring curtains flapping in the afternoon breeze and the boring window bed where her stuffed animals sat all in a neat line, his gaze rested on the piece of onyx in his sister's grasp.

“Why are you acting like a loon?” he asked her, stepping inside with hands tucked into his trouser pockets. Black of course, a colour that had taken over his entire wardrobe. “Crazy isn't your colour, Sis.”

“Get out!” Ellie tossed a stuffed bear at him. “Let me and my craziness have some privacy.”

“What’s that?” he leaned against the wall, tussled fair hair hanging in his eyes. “A love letter? Is that John nutcase stalking you again?”

Ellie rolled her similar blue eyes at her brother. “It isn’t from just any old person, Ayden. It is from *her*!”

Ayden lifted an eyebrow, boredom slowly setting over his handsome face. Ever since he’d turned sixteen, even Ellie could see the beauty of their mother in her brother’s features. His boyishness had all but disappeared, displaying the man he would grow up to be. She could see why all of her friends suddenly adored Ayden, but he was still the same person on the inside. He was still just her brother.

“How could you not know?” Ellie flopped a bit on her bed in an attempt to escape from the blanket, then hopped onto her feet. Brushing a hand down her white casual dress, she tossed a stray strand of yellow hair out of her eyes before approaching her brother. “It is from Madam Nix!”

Her brother chuckled, but he kept staring at the item in her hands. “You mean The Snow Queen?”

“Oh, she isn’t as bad as rumours say,” Ellie huffed. “Just because she doesn’t leave her estate doesn’t mean she is an ugly old witch.”

Ayden held up his hands in defence. “Never said witch. I just find it odd that someone with so much money hides away in that place. It is crawling with weeds, has broken windows and is haunted.”

“It isn’t haunted.” Ellie rolled her eyes again. “She just likes being alone. I can understand that.” She peered at her closet where her hidden collection of romance novels was tucked away.

“She gives everyone the cold shoulder, El,”

“Well I don’t care,” Ellie turned back to her bed and went to sit down, her feet swinging above the polished floorboards. “It looks like she is having another one of her famous parties and I was invited!”

With fumbling fingers, Ellie slowly broke the wax seal and opened the envelope that contained the letter. Her brother watched silently as the young girl pulled out a blood red piece of paper. Both brother and sister frowned when they saw that the paper was completely blank.

“I guess that party won’t be happening then,” Ayden pushed away from the wall.

“I don’t understand,” Ellie stared at the redness, not finding a speck of ink in sight. “I can’t get into the party without an invite.”

“It is probably a joke,” Ayden shrugged and turned to leave. “I guess John will be getting another bloody nose from me for doing this to you.”

Ellie only watched as her brother stalked away, heading to his bedroom right on the other end of the hallway. When his door slammed shut, she sighed and fell back across her bed. The red paper stayed clutched between her fingers as she stared up at the ceiling, the rays of pale sunlight dimming as afternoon turned to evening.

Yellow and faint pink stretched across her room accompanied by growing shadows that lengthened and swallowed the white of her walls and gown. Ellie stayed as still as a statue, refusing to let her tears fall from her blinking eyes, as her room grew cold and shadows filled the corners.

With a huff, she finally sat up and frowned. The breath that left her lips escaped in puffs of white. Shivers ran up her spine and cascaded down her arms. Ellie rubbed at her skin, forgetting the red paper on her blanket, and went to her closet to get a jacket. *Strange*, she thought, *that it would be so chilly in the middle of spring.*

Shrugging on a grey fur coat that fell down to her knees, Ellie snuggled into the thick rabbit fur and turned back to her bed, where she was stuck in place in awe at the sight. Moments before, her blanket had been crumpled

and the pillows had limply laid everywhere, but suddenly they sat stiffly atop her bed of...snow.

She took a step forward and reached out to touch the thin layer of snow caked on her bed. It was icy cold, the flakes melting on her fingertips to drip at her feet. Sucking in a deep frosty breath, Ellie's eyes widened and she dived in. White puffed up all around her as she dug for the red paper that must be an invite.

*It just has to be! Why else would something like this happen? Maybe the rumours about her being a witch were true. How exciting!*

Ellie dug and dug, her hands turning pink from the cold, until she found the piece of red that stood out like blood spilt across the snow. Picking it up, she hurried away from the cold and brushed the last remaining flakes from the page as her fingertips buzzed. Eyes of pale blue stared at the invite, and letters of gold shimmered across its soggy surface.

"It's real..." Ellie read the invitation to attend a midnight ball at the estate. "It's real!"

She danced around her room filled with winter air and stood before her window that had a pattern of frost across its clear glass. Ellie only smiled at her reflection of curling yellow hair and pale lips, before she turned to her door.

Of course Ayden was there in an instant. She had made sure to squeal loud enough for him to want to investigate her happiness. "Guess who is going to a party?"

"Are you still obsessing about that?" Ayden closed her bedroom door and went to read the letter. "And you are going?"

"Of course!" Ellie was already pulling out gowns from her closet with glittered shoes and fur jackets.

"Why?" Ayden noticed her room. "How long was my nap?"

“We are both going,” his sister stated. “Go put on something fancy and meet me outside. The estate isn’t far away, so we can just walk.”

Ayden watched open mouthed as his sister looked at a blue gown, wrinkled her nose and picked up a yellow sundress. He chuckled when she then tried to match the sundress to a pink feathered scarf.

“I thought you said this was a ball,”

“It is,” Ellie smiled.

Ayden smirked. “Then why are you going as a pink and yellow chicken?”

He had enough time to duck out of her room before the scarf could leave a few ruffled feathers on his face. With a small chuckle, he headed toward his room to get dressed. He hated parties and would rather create a new song with his piano or even watch the cat snoring in his sleep, but he couldn’t allow his sister to go to that strange place on her own. Ellie was stubborn enough to ignore his pleas for her to stay, so he went into his room and picked out a random outfit.

He dressed silently, listening to Ellie’s humming, and didn’t look up at the dust sheets covering everything he owned. He hadn’t slept, or actually *lived*, in his room for years. Ellie didn’t know, but he slipped out each night to be with his inner demons in the stalls that no longer held their prize winning horses.

Making sure to wear something that didn’t smell of stale hay or dirt, he headed out to meet his smiling sister. She looked older than fifteen in a clingy gown of snow white reaching her ankles and glitter was smeared across her eyelids. Hair in a curled bun on top of her head, Ellie twirled a strand of yellow around a finger as she smiled up at her brother, that piece of red in her grasp.

“You look dashing,” she straightened his tie, which he hadn’t realized he had put on. “Let’s go before Martha finds out we are missing.”

“You aren’t going to tell her where we are going?”

“Why should I?” Ellie wrinkled her nose in a way that upset him. “She is just the help.”

“She raised us, El,” Ayden sighed as he followed his sister out the door. “Mom and Dad left and never came back. If it wasn’t for Martha...”

“Then we would be out on the street with nothing,” Ellie finished for him, not reaching his gaze. “I know that, Ayden. I just want to have this one night where I am not looked at as if I’m a child,” she did then look into his always calm eyes. “I’m not that silly girl anymore that cries about everything.”

His sister plastered on a smile he realized had always been fake since the disappearance of their parents, and she skipped out onto the shadow draped lawn that held no snowflakes or a chill in the air. Ayden followed, always following, the young girl after closing the door silently so not to wake the mother he had known since his tenth birthday.

Ellie hummed a strange tune as she strolled across the freshly cut green lawn, flowers hanging their heads as if bowing to a princess. She turned around and beckoned to her brother to hurry up. “Come on, grumpy pants!”

“Don’t call me that,” Ayden growled, but when his sister looked away he allowed himself to smile. It felt unnatural on his face, but perhaps he could get used to it again. For her.

Brother and sister travelled away from their cosy home, its brick walls crawling with rose vines and pots of flowers hanging from hooks everywhere, until Ayden couldn’t see it anymore when he looked back.

Ellie didn’t look back, not once. She clutched the invite against her racing heart and smiled up at the moonlit trail as she led her brother to the

estate of Madam Nix. She could already feel the buzz of the party flowing through her veins, the excitement of being seen at such a lavish affair bringing to her mind ideas of how her life could change in that single instance. Perhaps she would meet a prince and be swept away to a paradise island, or maybe she could showcase her love of dancing to the Madam herself and get a job working with the finest performers in the world.

Smiling and walking with a skip in her step, Ellie kept her eyes on the black horizon, until she spotted the lonely tower attached to the massive estate. She clapped her hands and almost ran toward it. Ayden, on the other hand, stayed behind with brows lifted.

The place looked run down and empty. Shadows stared at them from behind dirty windows. Dead and yellowed plants clung helplessly at the burnt black walls, reaching up to the broken roof. The front door stood slightly ajar, but he heard no music or chatter escaping from its depths.

Rushing up to his excited, and obviously blind sister, Ayden grabbed her wrist and pulled her back. "Let's go back home. There is no one here." *Except for a few spirits*, he thought.

"I'm not going to miss this party, Ayden," Ellie ripped her arm away from him and sauntered over to the porch.

Her brother watched as the girl hopped up the two steps and walked right up to the front door. With a sigh and a roll of his ice blue eyes, he joined his sister's side and stood slightly in front of her—just in case a murderer or monster the witch had created tried to grab Ellie.

Ellie searched for a doorbell, but there was none, not even a knocker on the hardwood door. Tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, she shrugged and pushed the door open. Ayden held his breath as Ellie stepped inside.

"Wait!" Ayden pulled her back and almost tripped over something. It was a golden patterned carpet, black from soot and wrinkled.

He kicked it away and looked up at a large staircase that was covered by the merciless touch of nature. The inside of the estate matched its exterior. Brown and dirty green coloured vines were tangled around the wooden staircase, black dirt covered the steps and dead leaves littered everywhere he looked. Ayden took his sister's hand and stepped back to leave.

"This isn't right," Ellie spoke, her voice echoing through the empty place. The shadows seemed to smile in their direction.

Ayden's fears spiked and a cold sweat burst upon his brow. He needed to get his sister away from there. Though empty of a party, who knew what could be lurking right around the corner.

"Let's go," he tugged at Ellie.

The moment his words echoed up to the tattered curtains dangling across broken windows, a breeze entered the room and swept Ellie's hair into her face. Ayden held tightly onto her hand as the gentle wind turned into a storm.

Dust and crumbs of dirt attacked them, forcing Ayden to shut his eyes and pull his sister against his chest. As Ellie gripped him tightly, he felt those grains of dirt against his skin turn to soft pats of cold. He dared to peek out at the storm and saw a swirling mass of snow heading toward them, white and gold snowflakes dancing excitedly to no other music than the rapping of his heart.

He turned his sister around and pressed her face against his chest as the snow swallowed them up, and he stared as a blanket of white wrapped around the two of them. Ellie's grip tightened and Ayden kept staring. The flakes struck his face and the cold seeped into his flesh. He was about to run for it with his sister in his arms when he felt something strike him hard.

Bowing forward with a grunt, Ayden clutched at his eye as something sharp sent pain rocketing through his mind. Ellie screamed and held him up.



The moment she moved away from his chest, Ayden felt another stab go right into his heart.

“Ayden!” Ellie lowered her brother to the gold carpet that shined brightly below them. “We have to get out of here!”

Her brother only groaned, a hand to his eye and a hand to his heart. She couldn’t see what was wrong, she only felt the icy cold growing thicker and thicker all around them. She looked up at the tornado of white and stuck out her hand to try and dig their way out. Her fingertips touched the storm and she pulled back with a yelp, her fingers dry and blue.

“El,” Ayden spoke and she held him closer. “Don’t be afraid.”

“Of course I’m afraid!” she could hardly hear him over the howling of the wind. “You were right about this place.”

Ayden looked up at her, a small smirk on his pale lips, and Ellie gasped at seeing that his left eye blinked silver. She saw her own reflection, as if his eye were a mirror, and when he blinked the silver sank away from her gaze and her brother got back his blue eye. His gaze turned away from the sight of her, his nose slightly wrinkled, and he stared at something behind Ellie.

His sister immediately turned around and witnessed the tornado slowing, growing calmer and calmer, until the white snow was gone. In its place came warm light and the sound of a piano playing somewhere in the distance.

“It is beautiful here,” Ayden smiled. “I never want to leave.”

Ellie’s lips parted at the sight of the estate. No longer crawling with dead plant life or having the damp smell of decay; it shone with golden light and revealed a ball of lavish dresses, masked strangers and circus performers. Ayden stood from his pained position, eyes not blinking, and walked toward the glow of the party.

Ellie, on the other hand, was hesitant. No longer excited or filled with glee, the young girl folded her hands in front of her and watched her brother disappear into the crowd. Performers swung from the ceiling on ribbons of glitter and gold, faces painted like gothic clowns. One girl, with a red glittered hat, kicked out a leg and her shoe flew at Ellie, almost smacking into her.

The girl stepped back, nibbling on her lower lip. The staircase to her left was adorned in a deep red carpet running up the polished marble steps, and high above on the first floor was only shadow. Ice settled in her heart and she looked away, back to the ball where music from violins and more could be heard; where people danced clad in shining jewels and red lipped smiles, where her brother was nowhere to be seen.

The young girl let the red paper still in her grasp fall to the floor, and she entered the masked ball. Crystals of purple and green hung from the high ceiling, dripping with light, and the floor of blush pink tiles sparkled from the reflections of the guests. A waiter wearing a white suit and golden mask over his eyes went right up to Ellie and handed her a drink.

The glass was a thin vial containing bubbling liquid as blue as her eyes. When the waiter was gone, she only stared at it while the others sipped, ate, laughed and joked. But she didn't drink, didn't even taste it or went near the display of pastries and cakes nearby.

"What is the matter?" a deep voice was right behind her.

Ellie spun around, and her breath caught in her throat. The man was probably thirty years of age, with fair hair falling down to the stiff white collar of his shirt, and eyes, staring at her from behind a black mask, so intensely blue that Ellie was immediately caught in them. The man, with a face she had only known in her dreams even with the mask on, bowed to Ellie and gave her a light smirk. Even his smile was so much like...

“Pardon my curiosity,” he said calmly. “But you seem saddened by something.”

Ellie didn’t speak. She only stared at the man, at the ring on his left hand, at the dimple in his chin, at the eyes that were similar to hers. The man smiled widely at her and beckoned to a waiter to bring her something to eat. Upon his silver tray was an array of chocolates. Some painted pink or gold, and others plain balls of sugar.

“Try these and forget about your sorrow,” the man winked. “If they don’t do the job, then seek me out.”

And he was gone.

Ellie pushed the waiter aside and searched for the man, but he had disappeared. The one she did spot though was her brother, leaning against a table and staring at the piano player with a half empty glass in his hand. Ellie ran up to him, knocking into several dancing guests, and grabbed his arm.

“I just saw father!” she told him. “He is here!”

Ayden wrinkled his nose and turned his blue gaze, so much like their father’s, to her. His pale lips pulled down, his face darkening. “Why are you here, El? You are causing this place to look so unpleasant.”

“Ayden, didn’t you hear me?” she tugged at his arm, looking over the crowd for their father. “Our father is alive and well! I saw him, and you look just like him! We can go home and be a family again.”

That didn’t make his smile return. Ayden stared at the girl he called sister and was completely disgusted by her. Her skin was flawed, makeup too dark and glitter everywhere, and her dress was an ugly rag compared to the expensive gowns of the other women in the room. He was ashamed to be seen with her, ashamed to be related to her!

“Do not touch me!” Ayden pushed her away, causing the girl to spill a man’s drink. “Go home, Ellie, and forget about me.”

“Ayden?” she stared at him, at his left eye that shined silver. “What’s the matter with you?”

“Now I know why father and mother stayed away instead of going home,” Ayden growled. “They didn’t wish to be with something so ugly!”

Ice. That was all she felt the moment Ayden spoke those words. Ellie was glued to the spot, tears drowning her gaze, as her brother smirked and walked away. His words echoed in her mind.

*So ugly. So ugly. So ugly!*

Her blurry gaze went up to the piano player who was smiling at her; she was a beautiful woman with auburn hair falling to the small of her back and a wide smile that struck an ache within Ellie’s burning heart. Pressing a hand to her chest, Ellie went up to the piano player, still busy with her melody, and slammed a fist down onto the keys. The guests didn’t even notice, and the woman just kept on playing with that smile on her pretty face.

“Why are you here?” Ellie blinked and tears rolled down her cheeks. “Why did you and Dad leave?” she started to scream. “What kind of a mother leaves her children behind!”

“Children?” the woman chuckled lightly, fingers rippling along ebony and ivory. “I don’t have children, and I’m not even married.”

Ellie pushed aside the ache within her chest and grabbed the woman’s hands, her thumb pressing against her mother’s wedding ring. She frowned, and when the piano stopped playing, a band of guitars and drums started up happily. The young girl, staring at her lost mother, gripped the woman’s hands tightly and stared into her hazel eyes.

“What happened to you?” Ellie asked her. “What has Madam Nix done to you?”

“The madam is the kindest and most generous being I know,” her mother frowned. “Don’t you dare say otherwise about her.”

At that, Ellie could feel several eyes turning to stare at them. She swallowed coldly and breathed out a shaky breath that was a puff of white. “Mom, she made you forget about me and Ayden. We are your children! Your husband is here as well. Please, believe me!”

“No,” the woman said plainly and turned back to her piano.

“Fine,” Ellie turned to the guests looking her way. “I will make the madam release you from her spell.”

Ellie took one step, tears dry and gone from her eyes, but halted when her father came out from the crowd and pointed a finger at her. “Do not disturb the madam.”

“She is keeping you all prisoner here,” Ellie pleaded with them. “You have families out there, but stay here because of that witch!”

She knew she shouldn’t have said that. The music stopped immediately and silence reigned as the guests stopped drinking, laughing and chatting to stare at the strange ugly little girl that was against their madam. Her father was the first one to place his glass on the waiting tray of a waiter and clench his fists.

With another shaky breath of white and the feel of frost crawling up her arms, Ellie bolted from the room toward the staircase. She heard a few guests racing after her, snarling and shouting for her to stay away from the first floor. So naturally, she went right up to it.

She almost tripped when she spotted her brother atop the stairs. He looked at her with that dark gleam in his strange eyes, it made her want to run in the opposite direction. “Ayden, you have to listen to me!”

“Stay away from here,” was all he said.

Ayden hated looking at that girl.

*What was her name again?*

She was too frail and too *dirty* to be inside the home of the madam. But he stayed where he was so that the girl couldn't disturb Madam Nix.

*Where is the madam though?*

He only knew that she wanted her privacy.

*Why didn't she want to see me?*

He certainly wanted to see her.

“Ayden!” the girl was grabbed by a man that looked familiar. “You are under a spell!”

The man took her away, down a narrow hallway with her struggles and screams echoing through the room and up the staircase. Something inside of Ayden wanted to call out to the girl...

*What was her name?* A part of him wanted to be with her.

As the idea crossed his mind a blink of his left eye made pain rush up and push his thoughts aside, replacing them with the feeling of numbing cold. Ayden stumbled backwards and fell against a wooden door with a glass doorknob in the shape of a heart.

*Ayden...*

Frowning, the young boy turned to the door and pressed an ear against the cold wood. Someone was saying his name, calling for him.

*Could it be the madam?*

His heart started racing as he fumbled at the doorknob and managed to pull the door open. Stepping inside, Ayden forgot about the ugly girl, the party and the man with his eyes. He forgot about everything as the door slammed shut and light burst forth to reveal a grand hall.

Ayden was amazed at the cool silver of the walls, white painted flowers adorning their lengths right up to the ceiling that held several grand chandeliers dripping in diamonds. He walked down the length of the room, floor to ceiling windows on either side of him revealing the evening outside where there were black clouds and silver moonlight.

The polished marble floor, as onyx as the evening sky and dotted in golden stars, reflected the moonlight spilling in through the open windows, drowning Ayden with silver. When he finally tore his gaze away from the hall, he spotted a high backed throne atop a stage. It was made entirely out of ice.

The beauty of the throne, and the radiating blue of its clear glass surface, wasn't what made Ayden stop and stare with a chill crawling up his spine. No, it was the sight of the woman sitting on the throne. Face hidden behind a black veil attached to a top hat. The woman stood gracefully from the throne and allowed hair of the whitest snow to fall down in ruffled curls to her slim waist.

She wore a slim fitting black suit, buttoned up to her breasts and opened to reveal a beautiful pale neck. Ayden became nervous and almost shy to look further upon Madam Nix, but she seemed to stand there, like a frozen statue, just so that he could ravish her with his stare.

Nails of silver and lips as red as blood, the madam descended from her throne down a flight of steps. A black lace train followed her like a shadow, like darkened angel wings dragging across the floor. When her shoes of black leather touched down on the steps, frost crawled out from her heels and layered the surface with their cold touch.

The windows cracked as frost swam up their glass and the chandeliers shuddered as the madam walked beneath their light. Ayden didn't dare to move, to *breathe*. The owner of the marvellous estate, someone he had once

called the Snow Queen, stood before him in glorious beauty that made his heart ache so painfully, and he loved it.

“Ayden...” she spoke from behind her veil.

“You...” he swallowed loudly. “You know my name?”

She laughed, the sound like bells. “Of course. I’ve been waiting such a long time to meet you.”

“You have?” he shivered and she tilted her head to the side.

“You are cold,” she pouted. “I don’t want you to be cold.”

“I’m not!” Ayden then cleared his throat and shrugged as casually as he could under her gaze. “I’m fine, really.”

With the lift of red lips, she clicked her silver fingers, and Ayden immediately felt a heavy fur coat wrap around him. It was thick and very warm, as white as her hair and it smelled of crisp winter. Madam Nix smiled widely at him, at her new toy, and went right up to him.

He was as tall as her and at such a ripe age. Perfect. Just *perfect*. She purred as she caressed a fingertip down his cool cheek and strong jaw. Ayden shivered under her touch and stepped closer toward her. She noticed the gleam of silver in his one eye and almost laughed in glee, but only allowed a smile before leaning in toward him.

Ayden’s heart felt as if it was about to burst as the beautiful creature neared him. A chill still touched the back of his neck. He wished to rip the veil from her face so that he could witness true beauty. He wanted to feel her lips and taste her skin. He wanted her...

“I love you,” he spoke softly as she neared.

“I know,” she cooed. “And I’ve loved you since you were born.”

“What?” He frowned, pulling away from her.

He heard someone calling out to him. A girl’s voice, somewhere in the distance. *Who was that? Why is she calling me?* The madam touched



Ayden's hand, and he immediately forgot about the voice, but it kept on calling.

Ellie was searching for her brother. She banged fists against the door her father had locked after throwing her into a small room smelling of rain. Inside the bellow of darkness, the young girl kept shouting for Ayden as loudly as she could. She knew she had to escape. The room grew colder and colder. Soon, she knew, she would freeze to death, and her brother wouldn't find her again.

"Ayden!" she banged and screamed. "Ayden!"

No one came. She was trapped. Swallowing her tears and turning to the darkness of her prison, Ellie reached out her hands in search of some form of light, but she only felt cold air all around her. Becoming desperate and fear gripping her heart, she tripped forward and fell against something hard and ice cold. The young girl gripped at the cold item and pressed her forehead against its icy surface, allowing herself to weep.

"Ayden, I'm sorry," she cried, hot tears rolling down her flushed cheeks. "Please come back to me. I don't ever want to lose you; you are all I have left."

Her shoulders shook from her quiet sobs and her tears touched the object she clung to frantically. Upon the touch of her fat tears, a subtle glow erupted from what she held. Ellie jumped back as the light grew brighter and bluer. Soon, the room bathed in its light, and Ellie's breath was stuck in her throat.

It was a statue of a young boy. He was about Ayden's age, with beautiful eyes and pale hair falling over his small ears. What frightened Ellie was the fact that it wasn't a statue or clay carving of a boy; he was real.

She fell back against the locked door as she stared at the frozen boy, handsome features captured forever in a silent scream and wide eyes. His

arms were up, as if trying to keep an enemy from harming him. He looked so afraid. Ellie could feel his fear and pain just by looking at him.

“What happened to you?” she asked the boy wrapped in thick ice.

Scanning the ice around the corpse, Ellie spied a reflection of something else behind the boy. The lump of hot fear in her throat thickened when she stepped around him and found another boy, and another and another!

It was a room full of frozen bodies. All of them glowed faint blue as she touched their ice and frost casings. All of them were captured in their last moments of dread before they were killed by the touch of winter. Also, Ellie noticed with shaking hands and more tears blurring her vision, all of the boys looked similar to Ayden.

Beautiful.

Tall.

Blue eyed.

And so young.

Ellie pressed a hand to her lips, gave a small moan, then let a scream erupt from her chest. The statues shivered, as if shaking out of fear, as Ellie kept on screaming and ran back to the door. She crashed into the wood and sent fist after fist against the door.

“Let me out!” she clawed at it, nails cracking and blood painting the surface. “Ayden, stay away from her! Ayden!”

When her hands were too numb to keep on fighting, Ellie clutched them to her chest and turned to the frozen boys. She could have sworn all of their blank eyes turned to look right back at her. She wanted to cry, scream and claw out her own eyes, sinking to the floor with head bowed to her injured hands.

Staring at the red on her hands and aching fingers, Ellie realized she wasn't crying. No tears erupted from her eyes and no sob came from her

burning throat. With the drops of blood that stained her dress, the young girl stood up tall and walked down the row of frosted bodies. She was Ayden's only hope. Martha didn't know where they were, and her parents weren't going to save her, not while that witch still lived. She decided to rescue her brother, even if it killed her.

She reached the end of the room and pressed an ear to it, searching for the sounds of her brother. There were muffled voices on the other side and that made Ellie smile. She knew, deep in her heart, that her brother was there. All she had to do was break down the wall or find a trapdoor or...

Frowning, she felt cool air brush up her ankle. Ellie gazed down and squealed at finding an air vent big enough for her to fit through. That squeal travelled through the vent and out into the grand hall where Ayden stood with his head tilted toward the wall that separated him and his sister.

"What is that?" he asked as the woman he loved unbuttoned his shirt. "I know that sound..."

"Just the wind," the woman frowned slightly when she, too, heard the cry of the girl that had entered her home with her new toy. When the shirt was open and she spied smooth pale skin beneath, she smiled up into the handsome face of the boy. He smiled back at her. "You are with me now, Ayden. Stay with me forever, and forget about the world outside."

"Yes," he leaned into her.

He allowed her to run her hands down his chest, but his smile faltered slightly. His hands were itching to remove the veil. Reaching up slowly, as not to scare her away, he touched the thin lace of her veil that matched the train of her suit, and slowly started to lift it.

Immediately, his hands were slapped away and the woman was staring at him with silver fire glowing from where her eyes had been.

"Don't," she commanded him.

“Why not?” he asked, stepping up to her. “Let me see you.”

“In due time, my love,” she brushed a hand down her long silky hair. “Right now, I need you to forget everything and *everyone*.”

A crash came from the vent in the wall, distracting Ayden. Madam Nix sighed and clicked her fingers. Frost, as sharp as glass and even colder than her skin, surrounded the vent and secured it to the wall. Then the woman quickly went up to the boy and cupped his face in her hands.

“Forget,” she leaned in.

Ayden didn’t struggle. He didn’t think about why the vent was speaking in a familiar voice, and he didn’t worry about why the love of his life wouldn’t show her face to him. He just stood there and felt her lips brush over his through the veil.

Her kiss was like ice.

The cold seeped through his lips and travelled down to embed in his heart. Once the woman’s touch created tiny flakes of frost around his heart, Ayden forgot. He forgot about his home, he forgot about Martha who had raised him, he forgot about his gloomy room and silent piano, and he forgot about his sister.

In a rush, Ayden wrapped his arms around the slender body of his love and pressed his lips to hers once again. The cold wiped his mind clean, leaving behind only the smell, taste and feel of her. The Snow Queen. The most beautiful creature.

When he pulled away and tried to steal another kiss, the woman pushed against his bare chest and wagged a finger at him. “No more kisses for you, my dear,” was her reply to his pout. “If I were to kiss you again, it would be to the death!”

“I don’t care,” Ayden gripped her tighter. “Please, my queen.”

The vent crashed to the ground with a kick and a curse. Ayden pulled away from the smiling lips of the madam and saw a girl crawl out from the wall. She wore a dress speckled in red, her hands clutched to her heart as she stood, and her eyes glowed ice blue as she stared at him, then his love.

Ellie huffed out a heavy breath to clear it of the frost she had breathed on to melt the vent free, and faced the ice witch. Captured in her brother's arms, the woman turned to her with a snarl and placed her hands on her hips.

Ayden blinked, confusion fogging his mind. The girl from the wall...she had his eyes and his nose. They even shared the same shade of fair hair, only her face was burning red from rage. Her eyes sent daggers at the beautiful creature beside him.

Why would she hate his love? Why would she, such an ugly little thing, look at her as if she were a monster?

"Ayden," the girl with yellow hair spoke to him. "Get away from her. She is a witch!"

"Don't pay her any attention, my pet," the witch told him. "This little rat will be out of our lives shortly."

"I won't let you hurt him!" Ellie pointed a bloodied finger at her. "You kept our parents here for years! I will not allow you to take my brother as well!"

"Brother?" Ayden frowned, staring at the floor.

"Hush, snowflake," she touched his cheek and stepped in front of him to block his view of Ellie.

"Why did you do this?" the girl asked the madam.

"Because I wanted Ayden," the woman shrugged, almost bored. "I had to get him here. He is just *perfect*."

“You are insane,” Ellie walked up to her. “You can’t just kidnap young boys! I saw what you did to them.”

The woman shrugged again and went up to Ayden—who still stared at his feet. She wrapped her arms around his body and smiled at the girl through her veil. “They all failed, but Ayden is the one,” she held her lips near his cheek, but didn’t let them touch his skin. “His heart is as cold as mine.”

“You’re wrong!” Ellie walked right up to her brother, making the woman hiss and jump away, as the girl took her brother’s hands in hers. “Ayden, snap out of it. She is the one who stole our parents and left us orphans for years. They are here, Ayden, right downstairs. We can be a family again, with Martha, in our beautiful home.”

The boy, almost a young man, looked into the eyes of the girl he didn’t know and saw that she wasn’t about to cry, scream or fight. She stood strong, her touch so warm, and eyes filled with determination. She reminded him of his sister...

*What was her name?* “Ellie,” he whispered.

The girl smiled softly and gave him such a tight hug that he lost his breath. He didn’t know how to respond. He was tempted to hug her back, but the air grew colder and something stung in his eye.

“Don’t touch him!” a shrill voice sliced at his ears. “You are ruining him!”

Snow entered the room, falling softly from the ceiling and touched ice onto their heads. Ayden turned to see his love had changed. She looked so different. Skin turning blue and eyes bright silver, he started to fear the woman who had captured his heart.

“Ayden, we have to leave,” the girl tugged at his arm.

Ayden watched as his beloved raised her arms and the open windows let in the darkness from outside. An icy wind swirled around the hall, pelting him with ice and smothering the warm glow from the chandeliers. All the while, the Snow Queen stood smiling as the wind moaned and the storm whistled around them mercilessly. The rapping of the windows, the flutter of curtains and the groan from the storm harmonized into a tune; a song that took him back in time to when he would listen to his sister humming each night in her room before crying herself to sleep.

His sister.

The girl right beside him.

Ellie.

“I remember...” he lost focus on the woman and looked at his sister. The wind wiped her hair around her worried face, but all he saw was a beautiful young girl who had matured into a fighter. “Ellie,”

“No!” the madam wailed. “I will not let him go! I made sure to keep your parents here so that his heart would darken deliciously. I knew he wouldn’t accept my invite, but of course he would follow his foolish sibling anywhere. I waited too long for this!” the storm grew angrier, now pelting hail and blades of ice. “He is mine! My ice prince. My heir to the throne!”

“No, I’m not!” Ayden faced her.

The wind was so harsh that it picked up the veil covering the woman’s face and Ayden, with his sister, saw the monster beneath. Skin cracked and bitter blue, the Snow Queen was truly a horrid witch. The beautiful glow from her hair paled and turned to a watery green. No longer a creature of flawless ice; the woman in a wrinkled black suit and gnarled teeth looked more like a monster born of a swamp.

Water dripped from her fingertips and her green hair grew damp as she sent the storm at the siblings clutching at each other. Ayden turned Ellie

away from her attack, his back to the storm, and prayed that she would survive—even if he didn't.

Just the thought of him saving that ugly little girl made the witch scream and pull at her hair.

The estate shook and shouts came from the guests still dancing downstairs. Ellie pulled away from her brother and stared at the storm heading their way; a wave of white and deathly cold.

"No!" Ayden kept her down. "When this is over, get to mother and father, and leave this place. I won't let you die because of me."

"And I'm not going to leave you here!" Ellie told him, and then did something she hadn't done in years.

She pulled her dear brother into her arms and placed a kiss on his forehead. The warm touch, just that small spark of heat, flowed down his body like hot oil to melt the frost from his heart. Pain throbbed in his chest, and her brother let a single tear roll from his eye. The sharp prick in his gaze disappeared, and so did the ice that had once encased his heart.

"I love you, Ayden," Ellie smiled at him. "You were the best brother ever."

"Ellie, don't!"

But it was too late.

The young girl, who had once cried about everything and hated her life, flung herself at the ice witch. Ayden lost sight of her as the storm of snow fell on top of him. Cold surrounded him completely. Ice above, ice below, ice within. Ayden tried to calm his breathing as silence shut him away from his sister, the one thing in the world he truly cared about.

He couldn't hear her voice anywhere. Was she still alive? It was so quiet; he feared that he was dead already. But then his clothes became damp



from the pile of snow, and he struggled to breathe. He was still alive...for now.

A burning rage entered his body, the feel of Ellie's kiss still on his skin, and he started to dig. Up and up he went, not even knowing if he was going in the right direction. All he knew was that his sister needed him. His arms strained against the thick cold and his lungs burned as the air disappeared.

*Just one more push, he thought, just one more...*

His fist went through the snow and struck air. Heart in his throat and ears ringing, Ayden pulled himself out of the snow and shook flakes from his hair as he searched for Ellie. He gaped when he finally opened his eyes. The entire grand hall was filled with snow. White lay in piles in the corners and clung to the crystals of the chandeliers. But there was no sign of a yellow haired girl.

"Ellie!" he called out, pulling his legs free and shrugging off the wet coat of fur from his burning shoulders. "Ellie, where are you?"

Stepping down the hill of snow, Ayden went to where he had last seen her with the witch and started digging feverishly. His back ached and his fingers were numb, but he kept on digging; kept on searching and praying and pleading.

"Don't you dare be dead." He felt his eyes grow wet. "Don't do this to me, El."

White snow gave way to blue ice, then black hail, and then red. Red smeared across the floor and red stained in the cold. Ayden stared at it breathless and numb, vision blurring. There was no body. No footprint or piece of clothing. Only redness across white.

"Ellie!" his voice echoed through the room, muffled and sounding like a small child. His wail joined that of the wind swirling outside, which touched the cooling tears on his cheeks and chin. "Ellie...Ellie..."

Ayden bowed to the snow and pressed his forehead against the blood. His sister's kiss still burned on his skin, and he hoped to never lose that as well. The wind hummed to him, seeming to comfort his broken heart, and touched cold fingers against his back.

"Ellie?" Ayden glanced up at the touch.

The wind picked up the snowflakes bathed in red and let them dance in front of his eyes and sway back and forth. Ayden followed their little dance, his gaze moving up to the stage where the throne of the witch sat empty and covered in frost. But then he blinked...

The flakes of red picked up the patterns of frost and danced around them, persuading them to form a shape...the shape of a young girl.

Ayden didn't hesitate. He ran toward the snow being picked up and gathering together. The girl was made of ice, with skin a blush pink and hair so blue. But she looked the same. She looked so beautiful. In that moment, when she smiled at him with lips of silver, Ayden thought she was perfect.

"El," he reached out for her.

"Looks like there is a new queen around here," she laughed and reached out to his outstretched hand. She was icy cold, but Ayden didn't mind. He sank against her cut glass skin and held her, even though his body heat made her hair melt. "I'm never letting you go, Brother."

She pulled away from him and he noticed something as she spoke.

He frowned. Did his sister always have such sharp teeth?

Silver lips parted and his blue eyes widened.

"Together forever,"

The Snow Queen smiled wickedly.



# Luvia

Stephen T. De Marino

The children did their best not to sneeze as the dust flew by them in their hiding place. The little giggles that escaped were beyond the notice of the woman wielding the broom; her focus so intensely involved in her sweeping that the breathy laughter coming from the balcony railing was of little consequence.

Melisan swayed as though to hidden music, each step artfully placed as if she were dancing to the outside viewer. Her bunched skirts, the precise angles of her ankles, and how she held her broom in such a way, that it was away from her body, yet part of it, maneuvering and flowing with it, all led the children to believe she was dancing with a lord in her somewhat broken mind.

“Do you think it was Lord, or some handsome Servitor?” whispered Lanai.

“Probably just an ugly pig farmer who was nice to her, I should think” retorted Lucas. He was all of seven turns of the Orrery, yet he felt himself to be the champion of propriety and maturity in the face of his younger sisters’ giggles and games.

“Oh, go on with you, pig farmer indeed,” interjected Luvia, looking down at the maid as she swept the floor, her broom handle moving back and forth. “There is no pig farmer, no matter how nice, going to make her dance like that. That’s something else...something bigger.” She poked her twin sister, who was holding back another snort of laughter, in the ribs.

As the children watched, Melisan worked the room, always starting in the North Corner, and working her way through the points of the compass.

Her feet would always follow the grain of the wooden planks in the floor, stepping one parallel and the next perpendicular. First pass was right hand leading, her elbow up, the next was left hand leading, elbow down. Step, step, sweep, sweep, all along the walls she went, her body bending with the grace of long years of practice as she came to each obstacle, a dresser, an armoire, the linen closet. Each time, the broom would move, its axis changing as it removed the cobwebs and dust from around each piece of furniture.

Luvia could hear Melisan muttering in a gentle sing-song, though she didn't understand the words.

"Traitor's gate, Balun's gate, there's your fate. Move the dust we say, or there will be night to pay, crows are on their way. Leave the bit by the door, but clean every floor. Water gate, Fire gate, set your guards or they will hate. Crows will come in the night, and then it will be too late to fight. Traitor's Gate, Balun's gate, there's your fate..." On and on it went.

Luvia wondered at it, what the song meant to the broken little maid. She sang it gently under her breath as she cleaned, her broom removing everything that hid under the furniture, leaving no place upon the floor untouched. Despite her odd way of walking, Melisan never missed a spot. The entire floor was touched by her broom, every square inch was swept in a precise, distinct fashion, the pattern etched into her steps.

As the children watched, Melisan finished her sweeping, bringing all the dust into a neat little pile in the South corner of the room, where she took it outside, and with words not heard by the little spies, cast it onto the rubbish pile out back. She returned shortly, her echoing steps warning the children of her arrival, carrying a rag and bottle of oil.

As Luvia watched intently, Melisan would again, start in the North corner, and in a pattern that the children couldn't quite make out, would

begin to wipe down every piece of furniture. Some she would start on the top, moving everything off, wiping down the whole piece, the oil picking up the dust and removing it all. Others, she would start low, and work her way up, her fingers moving into every crevice and crenellation, rooting out the offensive bits of air-travelled earth that had hidden there.

“I’m bored,” grumped Lucas, and Lanai nodded affirmatively with him.

Luvia shushed them. “I want to figure out why she does it, what it means.”

“What *what* means, Luvy?” whispered Lanai.

“Yeah, what do you mean, what it means?” added Lucas. “She is just a broken old doll. Papa only keeps her around because she cleans so well. I mean her whole thing about any bird statue facing the window is weird. How she gets stressed if Papa or Mama move a room around, keening in that creepy voice of hers about how she has to ‘change the pattern’. How can you think there is anything in that head of hers but dust?” Lucas scoffed and turned his back to his sisters, figuring that was the last word, since he was the oldest.

Luvia mused over Melisan. She had watched her for many days, and the obsessive way she did things, the patterns, the ritual to it all fascinated her. It was like the priests on Torsday morning service. They, too, prayed to the four corners, and had a pattern to everything they did. Maybe this was Melisan’s way to pray. Somehow, it didn’t seem right to Luvia, but still she kept watch, thinking it over.

Once Melisan had moved on from the parlor where the children were hiding, Luvia, Lanai and Lucas emerged from their lair, and proceeded to play throughout the house. Their favorite game, of course, was avoiding Miss Alaina, the nanny. As they played though, Luvia would see Melisan working, and each time she would pause to watch for just a minute or so,

trying to tease the pattern from her movements. Luvia knew something was there, just out of reach, just out of sight. It might be a product of a broken mind, she knew; but it was more than that. It was important for some reason, Luvia knew that as well. Soon after, she was deep into a game with a ball, some straw men, and her siblings. For the rest of that day, Melisan and her patterns slipped from Luvia's mind.

A few days later, Lucas, Luvia and Lanai were in with their tutor, sweating through the various tense forms of high Eldar. Lucas kept struggling with the glottal stops, making Lanai giggle. Finally, seeing the frustration building in his young pupil, Tutor Hamman stopped him.

“Why don't we try something different? Do you know why we learn Eldar, even though there are no longer any Elves in the West? Why do I make you learn this difficult, impermeable language with all its contextual rules?”

Lanai piped up, “Because Papa pays you to?” Sniggers from Lucas and Luvia erupted behind their hands.

Hamman gave a patient smile. “No, though that is a good reason for it. We do not torture you with Eldar just because, child. There is a purpose to it. Do you know what it is?”

All three heads shook side to side. “No, Tutor, we don't,” came from the trio of mouths nearly simultaneously.

“The reasons for it are twofold. One, Eldar is one of the oldest languages, and many of the forms and constructions of its syntax and vocabulary are inherent in our modern tongues. If you understand Eldar, for instance, you can pick out the meanings in Gruish, Jamoni, and our own Frashavian. Second, there is great history involved. Many of the things in the world are named in Eldar, and their purpose given in Eldar. One of the great examples is in the Treaty of Vinitisia, which divided up the nations of

the West amongst the various Kings of Men. Arrayed like spokes from the *Panai Eloh'im Cuiati*...

Lanai raised her hand, "Oh, I know this one, I know it. It means the Palace of Elves....umm Center?"

Hamman smiled at her, his eyes wrinkling up like parchment in the corners. "Yes, Mistress Lanai, very close. It means the People's Palace at the Center of All."

Lanai beamed; her pride at having gotten something right showing in the grin that went from ear to ear. Luvia smiled back at her, justifiably proud of her twin. Lucas looked slightly miffed he had not gotten it first, but they all looked back at Tutor Hamman, waiting for more.

"As I was saying, arrayed like spokes from the *Panai Eloh'im Cuiati*, there are the roads that act as borders between the Central Kingdoms, each with its own gate and name. As you go around they are *Dhaerow Andon*, *Aluvia Andon*, *Balundi Andon*, *Nauri Andon*, and *Kallo'hi Andon*. Luvia, can you tell me what the names are in Frashavian?"

Luvia furrowed her little brow, unconsciously twisting her braid as she thought.

"Tutor, I think it is Bad Man Gate, Water Gate, I don't know *Balundi*, Fire Gate...and Good Man Gate?"

Tutor Hamman gave a little clap. "Very good, Luvia. There were some words in there that I did not expect you to know. But you did quite well."

Lanai looked at her sister as if she had grown another head. It had always been Lanai or Lucas that excelled in the Elvish lessons, Luvia usually only spoke up in math. It was quite out of character for Luvy to be the one with the answer.

Hamman turned to the slate behind him, and from one of his many pockets produced a piece of chalk. He drew a pentagonal figure with a line



transecting each side, coming together like a five pointed star in the middle. He pointed to each in turn reciting their names, “In Frashavian, they would be as thus, Traitor’s Gate, Water Gate, Balun’s Gate, later on known as *Aranai Ando*, or King’s Gate. Then you have Fire Gate, and lastly, Hero’s Gate. These are the five gates, leading to the five main roads from the Palace of the Elves. Though now in ruins, at the time, it was the very hub of commerce and travel.”

Luvia looked at the pattern on the wall, thinking of Melisan and her little ditty. How could a broken down maid know of the roads from the Elven Palace? Why did she chant their names? The puzzle of it rolled over and over in Luvia’s mind. She was only awakened from her reverie by a tapping on the window. She looked to her left, and through the thick leaded glass she could see a crow. Through a clear spot in the murky glass, it looked at her, its dark eyes shining brightly. For no reason she could explain, she felt a shiver, and the day seemed to darken.

Tap, tap, tap. The crow pecked at the lead holding the window in place. Tap, tap, tap. Luvia felt something from deep inside come to the surface. She held out her hand, fingers split, with the middle one cocked, and the words came to her. “*Autari wanwa Korko, Autari wanwa mor dulin, Autari wanwa Rakinna.*”

Tutor Hamman looked startled. He looked from Luvia to the now empty window and back again. “Luvia, what did you say? Did you say what I think you said?”

“I don’t quite know, Tutor. I know I wanted the crow to go away, and they seemed like the right words.”

“Did you say...crow?”

“Yes, Tutor Hamman, there was a big black bird, pecking at the window. For some reason, I wanted it to go away, so I said the words. Did I

say them right?”

Tutor Hamman went pale, his skin becoming nearly the same color as the grey in his hair.

“Lessons are over for today, children. Go and...just go. I need to speak with Lord Hondon.” He spoke the last quietly, nearly to himself, as he turned and left the room.

The children all looked at each other. Lucas shrugged, thinking that you could never tell with adults. They acted so strange sometimes. He vowed not to be weird when he grew up. Luvia and Lanai mugged at each other, making bug eyes and grinning at the chance to play, when normally their whole morning would have been taken up with lessons. As they left the room to go execute their plan of pursuing grass house construction for fairies, Luvia looked one last time at the window. No crows, but something not quite a voice, told her they would be back.

The remaining days of the week were hot, stiflingly so. The children retreated from the main house to hide out in the barn lofts at the back of the property, where, with the bay doors open, they could at least catch any little breeze that came by. Luvia and Lanai were busy making little straw men and women, acting out plays, while Lucas sprawled on his back on a nearby bale, head looking out the doorway upside down.

“Hey, Luvy, didn’t you say you had seen a crow?”

“Yes, brother, I did.”

“Hmmm. Why are there no crows around here, do you know?”

Lanai looked over her shoulder at her brother, then back to Luvia, making a face that said what an idiot she thought her brother was sometimes.

“Don’t you ever listen to the histories? Tutor Hamman told us about the crows last season, when we were covering the legends of the Elves,” Lanai

responded, her voice full of superiority at having remembered something before Lucas. Her brother, full of his own maturity, always tried to lord over his sisters that he was going to be the man of the house, and that he was the smartest one of the three of them. He was never very mean about it, just convinced of his own dominance.

Lucas spun around on his back, until his head was pointing, still upside down, towards his sisters.

“Well, since you are so smart, Lanai, why don’t you tell me what it is about the crows?” He chuckled a straw ball at his sisters, but it fell far short, crashing to the floor and breaking apart, a forgotten little construct.

“Crows used to be white, did you know? They were friends to the Elves, they worked in the Kingdoms, and were messengers and helpers and did stuff. What’s the word Tutor used, Luvy?” Lanai’s faced scrunched with effort of remembrance.

“Familiars? Is that it, Lanny?”

Lanai’s face brightened, “Yes, familiars, that was it. They helped the Elves with their magic and stuff. They used to sit in on councils and things.”

Lucas’s upside down face garnered an expression of concentration as well, his dark brow furrowed as he realized he did remember the legend.

“That’s right, and then in the War, between the Elves and the Chaos, the crows turned traitor, they spied on the Elves and gave away their plans to the enemy. Was it Bla’duin or Balun who cursed them and made them black once he found out?”

Lanai stuck her tongue out at her brother, “Neither, brother, it was Coi’t’h’una the queen who did it, after Balun fell at the Battle of Water’s End. She was so mad, she turned them all black to show the world what tricksters they were, and banished them from the lands of Elves, even the

ones who stayed loyal, so that they would never again have a chance to be stinkers.”

Luvia’s mind took in the things her siblings had just said. It exploded into a thousand fragments, and then reassembled them into new shapes, faceted creations of thought that cast light into the dark corners of her mind. Many things began to make sense to her, things that had not before. She found herself standing, looking out the open bay, across the land. A quiver ran through her spirit, a shuddering of soul.

“Luvy, what are you doing?” asked Lanai.

“I...it makes sense. I understand. She needs help. She needs help,” Lanai muttered, nearly under her breath.

“Who does? Who needs help, Luvia?” Lucas asked his sister as he rolled over onto his belly.

“Melisan.” With that uttered, Luvia turned away from her brother and sister, and jumped off the loft, into the hay below, leaving a pair of confused siblings behind her.

Luvia came pelting around the edge of the house, her breath coming in ragged gasps as she thrust open the front door. Melisan was there, her head cocked as though she were listening to something far distant.

“I know, Melisan, I know!” Luvia cried when she saw the broken maid, her mind racing with all the things to try to say to her.

“Know what, Miss Luvia? Know what?” Melisan looked at her, eyes slightly glazed, her expression bemused.

“I know about the crows. You are keeping them from our lands, aren’t you? You are doing magic, with your sweeping and moving of things. You set a pattern that helps keep them at bay, don’t you?”

“The pattern, yes, must keep the pattern. It is very bad if we do not keep the pattern. No birds to look out the window, mustn’t give them eyes. Must

keep things neat so they cannot come in, must keep it all in order, must keep the lines of force....” Melisan’s eyes glazed slightly further as she appeared to lose her temporary focus on the young girl in front of her.

“Yes, she has been doing that for us for most of her life.” The deep voice behind Luvia startled her to the point where she jumped.

“By the Tree, you scared me, Papa.” Luvia put her hand to her chest, feeling the heart inside thumping away.

“I am sorry, little one, I did not mean to, I was coming to talk to Melisan and noticed you there.” Her father, his robes of office still on, smiled at her. His bushy beard and eyebrows often gave him an appearance of stern countenance, but for his “Trio of L” as he called his children, Lord Hondon’s grin would escape its hirsute bonds. With a heavy step he came further into the room. Melisan noticed him, and proceeded to bow, dropping to her knees.

Lord Hondon walked over to Melisan, rested his hand upon the head of the maid who knelt before him.

“Rise, Melisan D’ar Utha. Your subservience is not warranted.” Melisan rose to her feet, hands clasped together, one inside the other, awaiting her Lord’s pleasure. Luvia’s father turned towards her, and though most of his smile was gone, there was a look to his eye that seemed to be a mixture of pride and concern.

“Tutor Hamman tells me you have been doing well in Eldar, my daughter; possibly, better than any of us expected.” Lord Hondon’s deep voice rolled around the room, echoing slightly in the chamber of the foyer.

“Yes, Papa, I am learning. Papa, are the crows coming?”

“That is part of what I was coming to talk to Melisan about when I overheard your conversation with her. To find out what approaches us.” The

last trace of his jovial smile was gone, his heavy brow furrowed with concern.

He turned back to Melisan. He ran his thumb gently across her brow, his voice so soft Luvia could barely hear him as he said, “*Kuile, tinu’an Balun. Kuile, il Korkoi ier sinome.*”

Luvia translated in her mind, “Awake, daughter of Balun, awake. The Crows are coming.”

Melisan’s face seemed to shift, her features, while still the same, seemed to change before Luvia’s eyes, almost as though they had been slightly unfocused before, but now were in diamond sharp clarity. She looked up at Lord Hondon with an expression Luvia had never seen before on the maid’s face, one of malice.

Luvia took a step back, shrinking against the wall.

With a deep and heavy tone, a voice issued from the little servant, one very different from that which normally uttered from her small throat. “Lord Hondon, why have you summoned me? I wish to return to my rest...”

“Crows have been seen, Mistress, they have been witnessed by blood of mine.” Lord Hondon’s voice was low, almost submissive.

Luvia had never seen her father thus; to her he had always been the Lord, the dominant force in every relationship he had. More than anything before, this disturbed Luvia; helping her comprehension of the depth of what was before her.

Melisan’s face twisted in a sneer of arrogance. “Impossible.”

Luvia could not help herself, it was nearly a compulsion as she barked in response, “I am the Daughter of the Hondon; do you think I would lie?” Her tiny foot stamped in counterpoint. Luvia was shocked at herself; she

never spoke to an adult like that. What was wrong with her? Her father looked at her with a similar expression of surprise.

Melisan's face turned towards her. The expression was searching, intelligent, and angry all at the same time. "Little Lordling, I do not care what you think you saw, it is impossible."

"Why? I saw the crow. I said the words to make it go away. They came from the Gods I think, they were words I did not know, and yet they came to me. Scared me." Luvia crossed her arms defensively.

"What words did you speak, Little Lordling? What could you have said to make the spies of chaos, the traitors of *Eloh'im'aia* go away?" Melisan's hands waved dismissively in Luvia's face.

*"Autari wanwa Korko, Autari wanwa mor dulin, Autari wanwa Rakinna."*

The spirit that was within Melisan screeched, "You spoke those words, you dared to command with the words of the King?"

Luvia backed away a step from the creature before her. Lord Hondon protectively stepped between them.

"Yes, Mistress Balun, she did speak those words. The Blood runs true in my line, and has come to fruit in my Luvia. Now, my patience runs thin. I tell you again, with all the weight of my Word. The crows come. Where stand the Wards?"

Melisan stood, staring deep into Lord Hondon's eyes. For just a moment, the expression on her face changed again. "Lord, she is scared, she is very scared." The words escaped as though torn from her.

"Silence, wench." The arrogant facial change that was the Daughter of Balun came back to the tiny maid's features. With a grim mien, she responded. "I will check the Wards, I will seek the presence, though I see no point in it. If I can no longer maintain them, there is nothing and no one

who can take my place. It will mean war has come again to your land, Lord of Hondon.”

With a spin on her heel, she turned away from the Lord, and stepped to the door, heading outside. Luvia and Lord Hondon followed her. The guards outside looked startled at the sudden opening of the entrance, but eased back at a gesture from their Lord.

Melisan’s hands stretched out, her fingers spread wide, except the middle, which pointed back at her palms; she began to chant, “*Annon templa’ohta. Annon templari Korkom, Annon templani Aranai Balun’ai. Annon templa’ohta. Annon templari Korkom, Annon templani Arani Balun’ai.*”

Luvia could not follow every word, yet she could feel the meanings flow through her, she knew that the Daughter of Balun was calling to the Gates, calling to the War Magic, seeking answers.

In response, there was a sound. The sound of a thousand trees shedding their leaves, of Titans’ breathing, of the wind’s death throes, of a million shivers down the spine, and of Luvia’s heart beating in her ears; it was the sound of wings, hundreds of thousands of wings.

Before them rose a blackness, an ebony wave of fury that stretched as far as Luvia could turn her head. The stippled discoloration of the universe rose above the tree line, tiny specks of darkness binding together, to create a miasma of stygian, winged anger.

Melisan’s body stood, arms still outstretched, but wavering, her spirit failing her in the face of what was before them. Luvia could feel the fear, the denial of the possibility that she had been wrong emanating from the woman whose body was not much taller than the much younger girl. From her fingers, glowed lines of force that began to shine with a brilliant white,



an intense light that sought to drive away the avian wave that was about to wash over them.

Lord Hondon turned to his guards, crying, “Run, go get everyone in the barracks, run! Run now!”

Luvia could barely hear her father, despite his loud, booming voice, her mind distracted by sensations running through her body. She could feel... everything. The weight of the crows pressing upon the Wards, their energies flowing through the tiny servant’s body as the daughter of Balun tried to keep them up. Luvia could feel the heartbeat of every single crow in front of her, and the life of every being within the house behind her, including her siblings. Small face slack, she swayed slightly as the tidal forces of magic moved around her in a coruscate current, their hypnotic pattern occupying every last bit of her mind.

As the daughter struggled, Luvia saw it, the worm of failure, running through the Wards; the spiritual rot weakening the guardian magic. The pride, the arrogance, the lack of compassion for their enemies that had left them vulnerable to this assault, it was visible to the young girl’s eyes. As Balun’s daughter failed, and began to crumple under the weight of what she was attempting to do, Luvia comprehended what was expected of her, what the Gods wanted of her. What they had always wanted, since time immemorial, they wanted...sacrifice.

Lord Hondon looked on in horror as the rising wave of blackness came closer to his home. They were close enough that he could make out individual crows, their black eyes flashing, their beaks and talons tearing at the fae barrier before them. From the heights of Hondon Home, he could see across the valley, the dark shadow of the murder falling across it. Beneath the wings of the swarm, he saw his people fall, torn asunder by

thousands of beaks. He sent his prayers skyward, hoping they would fight their way past the cruel cloud of wings to make it to the ears of the Gods.

As his pleas escaped his heart, he saw the body of his servant Melisan fall to her knees. The light that he had seen emanating from the hands of her possessed form began to fail, flickering and dimming. Lord Hondon could almost feel the cry of triumph cawing forth from the million throats that flew above his lands.

To his horror, as he stood stunned by the turn of events that threatened to crush everything he held dear, his daughter Luvia stepped forward to the place where Melisan's body lay. He reached forward as though to stop her, but Hondon knew somewhere deep in his soul, there was no other answer.

Luvia felt it pull her forward, step by step. Viscerally, in the very core of her being, there was what she needed. Deep within her, the power lie, a tiger deep within the kitten. She put her hands into the stream of power, taking the reins of the Wards into her control. She uttered a single thought, putting everything she could into its utterance. "*Puht'ta.*" Stop.



The sun was bright. Too bright, it hurt Luvia's eyes as it snuck past the blinds and across her face. She rolled over in bed, wanting to sleep some more, thinking it wasn't time yet for classes. She opened her eyes, and looked about her. When had she come to bed? The memories came rolling back to her as her mind caught up. Her father carrying her to her room, his eyes dark and drawn, her siblings asking what was going on as she clung to Papa, the images from before came into her head. Luvia slid her tiny feet out from under the covers and sat up. Her head felt...empty. She swayed a little with the effort of sitting.

“Oh, Mistress, you are awake! And I was not here...oh, forgive me, Mistress. I just stepped out to get you something to eat.” Her maid, Arnalia, was kneeling just inside the entryway, a bowl filled with cherries and almonds from the Hondon Orchards before her.

“Did I hear she is awake? Luvia, are you awake?” Lord Hondon’s voice came booming from the hallway. It seemed interminably loud to Luvia. Her head rang with the sound echoing in her bedroom.

“Shush, Papa. Not so loud, please.” Luvia had her delicate hands over her ears.

With a smile, Lord Hondon bowed in apology, and with a finger over his lips, gave his daughter his largest, hairy smile. Whispering he said, “My little Luvia. You gave us all a scare. Are you ready to rise?”

Luvia nodded her head. She put the robe that resided on the hook next to her bed around her body. “Am I very late for classes, Papa? Tell Tutor Hamman I am sorry I slept so long.”

Lord Hondon forgot his promise and laughed out loud. The ringing peals of his amusement as thunderclaps to Luvia’s sensitive ears. She clapped her hands over them again.

“Papa!” she said sternly.

Lord Hondon, with effort shushed himself. “No classes today, Daughter. It is a feast day; there will be games and entertainments on the green. Come, come see what the people have brought.” He held out his hand for his daughter to take.

As they walked out of Luvia’s room on their way to the balcony at the end of the hallway, Luvia felt a slight tug at her soul. She pulled her hand out of her father’s and stepped into the salon. With a determined set of movements, she moved every figurine in the curio cabinet to face out to the window.

“That’s better,” Luvia said to herself, and then rejoined her father in the hallway, eager to see the festival shaping up on the lawn below her.



# The One and Only

Victoria Kinnaird

*\*This story is written in UK English\**

*This story features characters from “Fake It”, the first book in The Keswick Chronicles Series. The story is set before the events of the novel.*

Jessica Rosenfeld was easily one of the coolest girls JJ had ever laid his baby blue eyes on. Everything about her, from the careless holes in her fishnets to the regal way she carried her petite frame seemed absolutely effortless. If there was one thing JJ prized more than anything, it was a confident girl.

He'd charmed his way into the hearts and pants of girls like her before—from acid tongued London punks to fast talking, ambitious girls from the boarding schools upstate. He hadn't been nervous when he'd been seducing them, but something about Jessica Rosenfeld made him jittery in a way he hadn't been since the last time he'd taken cocaine.

With a sigh, he pushed away from his parked car, ducking to check his reflection in the window. His blonde hair, which usually fell around his handsome face, was pushed back and held in place by his Wayfarer sunglasses. His summer tan clung to his skin, a mischievous glow that made his blue eyes seem even brighter. He looked good and he knew it. Jessica would know it too, if he had his way.

“Well, Miss Rosenfeld, you get prettier by the day,” he said, loud enough to catch her attention as she walked by.

She skidded to a stop in front of him, her chunky boots kicking up a cloud of dust.

He'd never really looked at her up close, and he regretted that slip up as soon as their eyes locked. The contrast between her precisely cut black hair and pale skin was distracting, making him lose his train of thought. Throw in her grey-green-blue eyes, delicate features and full, mocking mouth, and she was definitely one of the most beautiful girls JJ had ever seen.

"I'm surprised you noticed," she snorted, her flawless face even more captivating when it was animated by her disdain. "Although I'm flattered you tore yourself away from your own reflection to notice, JJ Keswick."

The laugh that bubbled in his chest was startled but genuine. She cocked a perfectly shaped brow; he had clearly surprised her as much as she had surprised him.

"I like you," he announced, crossing his arms. He felt the soft cotton of his tee shirt riding up, exposing a flash of carved hipbone and flat stomach. Jessica's eyes flickered between his hips and his smiling face, disbelief warring with amusement on her pretty face.

"Really? You decided that just now?"

"I'm impulsive," he replied with an easy shrug and a wicked grin. "I want to invite you to my back to school party this Saturday. Your friends too."

"My friends?" She repeated, disbelief winning out the battle of expressions.

"Yeah. Those guys you hang out with. The girl too."

It was hard for him to play it cool, act like he didn't know exactly who he was talking about.

He might not know much about Jessica Rosenfeld, but one thing he knew for sure about her was that she was Jack Daveyson's best friend and had been for as long as anyone could remember. She played bass in his band too, although JJ hadn't been able to find out the band's name.

As lovely as Jessica was, in JJ's opinion, she was a close second to the elusive Jack Daveyson. When JJ had left Wayville destined for boarding school in England, Jack had been a weedy little boy. By the time JJ had returned to the small town, expelled and bored, Jack had been nothing like the kid he remembered.

He'd filled out, but hadn't bulked up like most of the other boys. His slender frame was roped in lean muscle, his arms toned and strong. His dark hair had been kept neat as a child, before his mother had died. Now it fell around his high cheekbones in shaggy layers, making him look like he had just crawled out of bed after a spectacular night. The loss of his mother had sharpened his gaze, adding a sadness to the sweep of his eyelashes that drove JJ quietly wild.

Yeah, he had it bad for the guitarist. They were both starting senior year, and it was JJ's last chance to secretly seduce him. But boys like Jack didn't hook up with boys like JJ. He was too sensible for that, smart enough to know any guy who couldn't openly date him probably wasn't worth the hassle, even if he was hotter than the surface of the sun.

That's why he needed Jessica. If he could win her approval, Jack was sure to follow. There wasn't a girl in the world he couldn't eventually charm, Jessica included.

"Why?" Jessica asked, crossing her own arms. Was that a flash of ink on her pale skin? He'd have to ask her about that, later.

"There's only so much pom-pom talk I can take," JJ replied. "You guys would add a bit of...colour...to the proceedings. Figuratively speaking, of course," he said, taking in her head-to-toe black outfit.

"You're hilarious," she said, rolling her glittering eyes. "Is this some sort of set up? Popular kid invites a bunch of misfits to his party, so the



other equally attractive and morally bankrupt popular kids can play a cruel trick on them?”

“Wow, that’s a lot of words,” JJ breathed, head spinning. “Firstly, none of the other kids are as attractive as I am. Morally bankrupt...well, I’ll let that one slide. Look, I know that I come across as a bit of a...”

“Dick,” Jessica added with a grin.

“Right,” he agreed. “But you were wearing an A Day to Remember tee shirt last week. I saw Jack in a Glassjaw shirt a few days ago. Fucking Glassjaw, in a town like this? You’re my kind of people.”

She kept her expression blank, but he could see the shock in her eyes. Shock, and curiosity. That was his favourite combination, he could work with that. He only realised he’d called Jack by name a second after he’d finished speaking, but if Jessica noticed, she didn’t mention it.

“And what if you’re not our kind of person, JJ Keswick?” She asked, her petal pink lips caught in a revealing little smile.

“Come find out.”



JJ had never actually set foot in the Daveyson Music Store. Jack worked there most afternoons and every weekend from what he could tell, which was the reason JJ hadn’t gone inside. He’d felt a pang of guilt every time he ordered a CD online instead of supporting the local shop, but he couldn’t just stroll in there and turn on the charm. Not on Jack.

It was a small store, the smallest on Main Street, but it was by far the coolest. As far as he knew, the store was owned by Jack’s dad, although he’d never seen an older man working there. He’d only been “researching” Jack for a few hours a day over the summer though, so he might have just

missed Mr. Daveyson. Or, been so distracted by the sight of his son that he just didn't notice anyone else.

He set up camp at the coffee shop across the street, sitting by the window and pretending he wasn't glancing across at the music store every few minutes. Jack was sitting at the counter, flicking through a magazine and nodding along to the beat of whatever he was listening to. He seemed completely relaxed, his shoulders hunched and his hair in his eyes. He was so still, seemingly at peace with the fact he was working on a Friday afternoon.

Jessica was walking along the street, guitar case slung over her shoulder. She'd added blue streaks to her hair, JJ noticed, smiling to himself. The flashes of pale skin through her torn jeans were almost as dazzling as the smile she aimed at Jack as she stepped into the shop.

She put her guitar down and leapt on to the counter, her heavy boots banging against the already scuffed wood as she swung her legs over the counter top. Jack's answering smile was exasperated but fond.

Jack had lit up in her presence; it was visible even across the street. His eyes were brighter, his smile wider as they spoke. He even pushed his hair away from his face, like he didn't have to hide anything from her.

JJ couldn't read lips, but it looked like Jessica was trying to talk Jack into doing something. The young shopkeeper rolled his eyes, shook his head, shrugged his shoulders, and judging by the way Jessica threw herself into his arms, eventually caved in.

A nervous fluttering unfurled in JJ's stomach at the realisation that she had probably just convinced Jack to attend his party. Come hell or high water, he was going to come face to face with the boy he'd been fantasising about all summer.

JJ wasn't sure what scared him more – meeting Jack and messing it up, or meeting him and having it go perfectly. He'd wanted enough people to know that the only thing more terrifying than rejection was getting exactly what he wanted.

Jessica didn't stay for long, leaving Jack alone in the store again. JJ watched as he finished reading his magazine and re-arranged the vinyl display, stopping only to pick a record and put it on. He moved with the quiet confidence of someone who had spent his life working diligently under the radar. JJ wondered what Jack's favourite song was and who inspired him to make music. He wanted to know where Jack's dad was and if he avoided his son the way JJ's dad did.

But more than anything, he wanted to know what Jack's smile would feel like pressed against his own.



It was hard to keep one eye on the door and another on the drunken hockey player who was one tequila shot away from falling down the stairs, but JJ persevered. The marble floored foyer was full of teenagers, and the creepy pot dealer from the grocery store, all of them laughing, dancing and drinking. The juxtaposition of the scene – rowdy teenagers packed into his father's expensively decorated house – made JJ smile.

The main staircase split about halfway up, sweeping dramatically to the left and right to connect both wings of the house to the foyer. JJ's room, bathroom, music room and walk-in closet took up the left wing of the house, so he hovered at the top of the left staircase, ready to retreat to his bedroom if the need arose.

He was nervous, again. He hadn't been nervous – really nervous – in a very long time. It irritated him as much as it excited him, knowing he could

feel so strongly about another person. He had one chance to get this right and he was going to give it everything he had. JJ knew, as he gazed out at the people who loved, loathed and lusted over him that his life could change that very night. He couldn't wait.



“Rosie, you have to get him to come to this party!” Jessica whined down the phone. “It’s at the Keswick house. JJ invited us personally. He has to come!”

Rosemary Watson sighed, her blonde fringe caught in the huff of air. She cradled the phone between her shoulder and ear, glancing up at the ceiling that formed the floor of her wayward nephew’s bedroom. A muffled rumble of noise assured her he was in there, music blaring as usual, hiding from the world.

“I’m with you, kid,” she assured Jessica, frowning. “I thought you had already convinced him? He came home yesterday mumbling something about peer pressure and stupid rich kids, so I thought you were good to go.”

“We were, then he messaged me saying he was staying in! It’s the start of our senior year, we gotta go out with a bang.”

“Alright, give me twenty minutes, then come get him. He’ll be on the porch waiting for you, I promise.”

“You’re the best, Aunt Rosie!” Jessica replied, whooping with delight. “See you soon!”

Rose hung up the phone, rolling her shoulders and bouncing on the spot as if she was psyching herself up for a fight. She’d spent all of her adult life auditioning for plays and musicals, and after the death of her sister, she’d stepped into the greatest role of all time – mother. If she could convince a

casting director that she was a perky high school student, she could sure as hell convince Jack to go to one party.

“Of course I ended up with the kid you need to convince to go to parties,” she grumbled as she climbed the stairs to his room. “Who needs the freaking lottery?”

Jack’s door was shut, shaking slightly in its frame. He was listening to something heavy then, one of the bands Rose tried to keep up with but inevitably lost track of. A band he loved had split up recently, she knew that much for sure – he’d been devastated and sales of their greatest hits CD had jumped at the store. Maybe that was what he was sulking about. He was at that tricky age where she was never quite sure what was weighing on him, not that he had any shortage of options. But he was a good kid—the best kid—and he deserved to have fun with his friends. Especially if that meant he could gather intel from within the mysterious Keswick Mansion.

She knocked on Jack’s door, finding a blank spot between the novelty license plates his dad had sent him from the road. The volume from inside decreased, so she could hear him swinging his long legs out of the bed and padding across to the door.

It swung open, revealing her favourite, and only, nephew in all his teenage angst-ridden glory. He hadn’t even dressed for the party—or at least, she hoped not. She’d raised him better than to think he could wear a pair of baggy old jeans and an oversized tour tee shirt to a party. He was such a handsome boy with his piercing hazel eyes and charmingly dishevelled dark hair, she just wished he believed it.

“Jack Daveyson, why are you hiding away up here? Don’t you have a party to go to?” She asked, hands on her hips, hoping she looked stern.

“You know, it really creeps me out when my friends call to speak to you instead of me,” he replied, rolling his eyes.

“You should just be grateful that the women in your life get along so well,” Rose pointed out, smiling softly.

“And people wonder why I’m gay.”

“Why don’t you want to go to the party, sweetheart?” He stepped away from the door, clearly sensing a long conversation. She slipped inside, glancing quickly around the room to make sure it was tidy.

His bed was made but the cover was creased. His record player was switched on, the vinyl spinning hypnotically, filling the room with a softer version of whatever he’d been listening to earlier. The posters that covered his wall were curling slightly at the odd corners he hadn’t stuck down, but apart from that, everything seemed pretty neat. Yeah, he was definitely a good kid.

“I’m not the partying type,” he replied, sitting on the edge of his bed. She sat down beside him, bumping her shoulder against his.

“I know the whole drinking-dancing-partying thing doesn’t come naturally to you,” Rose began. “And there’s absolutely nothing wrong with that. But you’re nearly eighteen years old, Jack. You should be putting yourself out there, taking chances and making memories.”

“I don’t even understand why the Keswick kid invited us,” he admitted with a sigh. “He’s never shown much of an interest in us before.”

“Hasn’t he been going back and forth between boarding schools his whole life?” She pointed out. “Maybe he just hasn’t had the time before. I’ve seen him around town, he’s hotter than Palm Springs in a heat wave.”

Jack made a face, sticking out his tongue and crossing his eyes, but she knew he didn’t really mind her talking like that. There wasn’t a massive age difference between them after all, and she wasn’t his mom. Not really.

“Or like the fires of Hell,” he snorted, running his hands through his hair. “Jess did say that he dropped the names of a couple of really great

bands when he was talking to her, maybe he's not too bad."

"So, the fact that he looks like he just walked out of a high end fashion magazine does nothing for you, but throw around a couple of band names and he gets the seal of approval?" Rose asked. "You baffle me, kid."

"I'm a mystery," Jack murmured, eyes bright through his lowered lashes. "Maybe I should go, but I don't have anything to wear."

"Says who?" Rose grinned, getting to her feet. "I was at the community theatre the other day, sorting through the costumes, and I bought some things home for you."

"Really?"

"And you know how protective Doris is over the costume department, so they're all in great condition. I'll just go grab them."

She'd fallen in love with the vintage blazer as soon as she'd seen it hanging up on the discarded costumes rail. It had only been used in one production and was in great condition, considering how old it was. Doris explained how it had been her son's once, a couple of decades ago. It had been the height of fashion in London then, and Rose could tell it was one of those pieces that had cycled back into style. It was black with white trim along the lapels and across the pockets, fitted at the waist and flaring at the back in a way that would really highlight Jack's slender frame. Daniel worked hard to provide for them, and she helped when she could, but they just didn't have the money to buy Jack the really amazing clothes that he deserved.

So, she made a deal with Doris – she was going to do her gardening once a week for the next month – and ended up leaving the theatre with the blazer and an unused pair of new black skinny jeans that she knew were Jack's size. It wasn't often that she could treat him to some clothes that

weren't necessities, and if they helped give him the confidence boost he needed, then she would do Doris's yard for the next year.

She couldn't stop smiling when she handed over the clothes, her cheeks aching when she saw the way his eyes lit up.

"The blazer belonged to Doris's son. He wore it to a David Bowie concert once," she told him. "He works for NME now, you know, the music magazine?"

"I know what NME is," he replied with his trademark exasperated smile. "These are great, Aunt Rose. Thank you."

"Any time, kid. Now, you put those on and I'll help you tame that hair of yours. Jessica is picking you up in fifteen minutes."



Jessica was waiting for him in the kitchen, grinning from ear to ear as he stomped down the stairs in his battered calf high Dr Martens. The boots had belonged to his dad at least a decade ago but hadn't fallen to bits, yet.

As his aunt/substitute mother, Rose knew she was biased, but Jack really was a handsome kid. He'd dragged a comb through his hair with enough force to get it to behave and his eyes were glittering with something that looked like excitement. The blazer fit him perfectly, just like she thought it would, giving an elegance to him that she had never seen before.

"Hell yeah! You scrub up well, Daveyson!" Jessica grinned, leaping to her feet to fling her arms around his neck. He rolled his eyes but smiled at her, patting her back.

Rose couldn't help but wonder what their relationship would be like if Jack was straight. Jessica was a beautiful girl, petite but absolutely fierce. She had dressed to impress in a tight, thigh skimming black dress and a fitted leather jacket, looking tougher than a girl her size had any right to.



“Alright, kids. Now as much as I hate playing the concerned adult role, Jack’s dad trusts me to keep him alive and oddly enough, I don’t want to let him down. So – don’t get drunk, remember weed is a gateway drug and be home by midnight. You can stay here tonight, Jess, it’ll be safer if you two come home together.”

“Yes, Aunt Rosie,” the two kids parroted, their smiling faces the picture of innocence.

She snorted – she knew better.

“And remember, you are only young once, this is the start of your senior year, and as long as you don’t get pregnant or catch a disease, there’s no mistake you won’t laugh about later!” She yelled as they strolled towards Jessica’s parked car.

She could feel Jack rolling his eyes, even with his back turned, and she beamed at the back of his head. She wanted him to be safe, sure, but more than anything she just wanted him to be a kid and have fun. If Jessica’s enthusiasm was anything to go by, he was in for the time of his life.



About three hours into what was shaping up to be another infamous Keswick party, JJ found himself fondly reminiscing about the brief couple of weeks when he had stopped throwing parties. It seemed like the local girls had formed a queue, each of them taking a shot at flirting outrageously with him, eyebrows raised and lips pursed.

It was all too much, too fast. He was expected to smile, wink and flirt outrageously back, picking a girl out and following her to his bedroom. That’s what he would usually do, he would even enjoy it nine times out of ten. He wasn’t sure when the idea of meaningless sex stopped appealing to him, couldn’t pinpoint the moment when it no longer filled the void that had

been eating at him ever since Mike died. All JJ knew was he couldn't keep the mask on much longer, it was making his skin crawl.

His music room was separated from his room by his ridiculously lavish en-suite bathroom. It had originally been a study, but had been converted into a music room when he was little. His mom had started filling it with instruments when he was still too young to play most of them. His black upright piano glittered in the moonlight drifting in through the balcony door. The electric guitar in the corner had a matte purple finish, sleek, wicked and utterly seductive, even when it was left to gather dust on its stand. His white pearl finish drum kit had been taken down, stacked in pieces in a corner until he had the time and the desire to re-assemble it.

Jack Daveyson stood by the piano, his fingertips resting reverently on the polished wood. He was leaning over to read the sheet music left haphazardly on the music stand, his lips curved in a knowing smile. His unruly hair spilled into his eyes—surrounded by the instruments, he was distracted and completely entranced.

“Of all the music rooms in all the world, you just so happened to wander in to mine,” JJ said, resting against the doorframe in the hopes it would disguise the nervous tremor in his hands.

Jack spun on his heel, guilt flashing across his face like a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar. A sharp inhale of breath betrayed his surprise, his eyebrows drawing together as he frowned.

“This is yours? All of it?” He asked, uncertainty and curiosity warring in his captivating hazel eyes. JJ was a bit hurt by the shock in his voice – sure, he may give off the impression that he cared more about partying than playing music, but he'd hoped that someone like Jack would see through that, the way he seemed to see through everything and everyone else.

“All mine,” JJ confirmed with a nod, stepping into the room.

Jack seemed wary, but didn't take a step back. "The guitar is a Fender," Jack pointed out, throwing an appreciative glance in the direction of JJ's favourite electric guitar.

"A 1992 Stratocaster, to be exact," he pointed out, taking in the way Jack's eyes widened ever so slightly.

"Do you know how much those guitars cost?" Jack sputtered. "I'd give my right arm for one."

"Well I paid about a thousand for it, give or take," JJ shrugged. "Wouldn't be much use to you if you traded arms for it though. You'd be better trading a leg."

The surprise on Jack's face melted into a soft, almost self-conscious smile. Combined with his lowered lashes and faint blush, it was enough to make JJ feel a little shaky. It was like being drunk, the whole world seemed a bit brighter even if it was blurry around the edges.

"So you're the infamous JJ Keswick," Jack said, his eyes raking over him quickly.

"The one and only," JJ replied, taking a very gentlemanly bow.

Jack's smile widened. "I thought you would be taller."

"It's because I play basketball. That's the stereotype, right?"

"I've never met a jock with a music room like this," Jack admitted, casting another appreciative glance around the room.

There was a tenderness in his gaze that JJ recognised—it was the look of someone who had endless love and respect for what he was looking at. He hadn't seen a look like that in a long time.

"Like I said," JJ winked. "I'm the one and only."

"I'm getting that," Jack said, tearing his eyes away from the gleaming instruments to meet JJ's. "Is that why you invited Jessica to your party? To show her your...music room?"

He couldn't help but laugh at that, the way the blush rose higher in Jack's pale cheeks as he asked his question was just adorable. He was clearly trying to ask JJ another question, and JJ knew his response could dramatically alter the coy playfulness they both seemed to be wrapped up in.

"What if I wanted to show it to you instead?"

Jack's eyebrows raised and his blush deepened. He clearly had not been expecting that – hell, he would have been expecting anything but that. JJ's somewhat fluid approach to sexuality was one that was kept strictly under wraps. It wasn't worth the small town stigma, or having to explain himself constantly. He also had the sneaky suspicion that his father wouldn't be too pleased if his disappointment of a son also turned out to be less than straight.

"But I'm..."

"I know. You're Jack Daveyson. You're smart and you're sensible. You don't believe in random hook ups, and you've sacrificed having a love life for having a quiet life. Cuz let's face it, these cookie cutter townies wouldn't let you openly date another guy without making some sort of fuss about it. How did I do?"

"Ten outta ten," Jack replied, a hint of sadness creeping into his smile. "But that's not what I was going to say."

"Oh," JJ murmured. If he was the type to get embarrassed, he would probably be praying for the ground to open and swallow him up. "What were you going to say?"

"That I'm gay, and you're not," Jack pointed out, shrugging his shoulders.

"You sure about that?"

"Not anymore," he admitted. "Is this some sort of prank?"

The blonde host shrugged out of his tailored jacket, draping it over the piano like it didn't cost more than Jack made in a month. He flicked open the top button of his shirt with practised ease, revealing a tantalising hint of collarbone and flawless tanned skin. Jack's eyes swept over the strong line of his jaw, tripping down the long line of his throat like he just couldn't stop staring.

It had been a while since JJ had made the first move on anyone. He hadn't really been interested enough in someone to put himself out there like that. Sure, if a girl came on to him, he was happy to go along with it, but he hadn't shown his hand for ages. The more he let people see, the more information they had to use against him.

Jack's lips were soft and slightly parted in surprise when JJ leaned in for a gentle kiss. JJ smiled as Jack flailed a bit, not sure what to do with his hands. He placed them on JJ's waist, the callouses on his fingertips making the blonde boy shiver when they brushed against his exposed skin.

"Convinced yet?" JJ whispered as he pulled away, his words ghosting over Jack's lips.

"Yup. Where's your room?"

Between the music room and the bedroom, Jack had kicked off his boots and shrugged out of his jacket. He was grinning as the back of his knees hit JJ's bedframe, laughing under his breath when JJ nudged him back onto the bed and climbed on top of him with all the grace of a drunken sorority girl.

JJ was just reaching for the hem of Jack's shirt when a shrill yell disturbed them. Jack seemed to recognise the voice straight away, groaning in frustration and flinging an arm over his eyes.

"Five minutes until curfew, Jack!" She yelled again. JJ recognised her voice – it was Jessica, probably yelling from along the hall. "Quit snooping

and get down here, I don't want to get on Aunt Rosie's bad side!"

"I gotta go," Jack breathed, sitting up and freeing himself from the tangle of limbs.

JJ could only watch with a sinking stomach as Jack hastily gathered his things, blushing from the tips of his ears down. JJ couldn't help but wonder how far that blush went before trying to shake the thought out of his head. There was no point wondering – Jack clearly had no intentions of staying.

"You could stay," JJ blurted, getting up from the bed. "I have plenty of space."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Jack replied quickly, grabbing his jacket as he backed out the bedroom door. JJ could hear Jessica's knowing laugh from his spot by the bed – no doubt she'd be grilling Jack for information all the way home.

"It was nice meeting you, JJ," Jack said with a shy duck of his head. "Thanks for inviting me."

"Sure," JJ murmured, dazed by the sudden turn of events. "Um, you're welcome."

He hesitated in the doorway, wanting nothing more than to follow Jack out into the hallway, but knowing it was highly likely that someone would spot him. Following Jack out of his room, hair askew and shirt rumpled, would only start whispers both of them could do without. So he hung back, heart racing, listening closely as Jack shushed Jessica and followed her down the stairs. The sound of the front door closing had a horrible, final quality to it that made JJ feel a little bit queasy.

He buried his hands in his hair, pushing it away from his face as he dragged in a deep, shaking breath. As he spun on his heel, something caught his eye.

It was a bit battered and in need of a good scrubbing, but he recognised it straight away.

It was one of Jack's boots.



JJ jerked awake, his straw blonde hair plastered to his face by a fine sheen of sweat. His cotton sheets were tangled around his legs, keeping him in place as the dream trickled away, like sand through outstretched fingers.

He stared up at his ceiling, breathing hard, mind spinning.

“What the fuck was that?” He asked the empty room, heart thudding.

His disbelief didn't stop him rolling to the edge of his bed, half hanging off it so he could check the floor underneath. There were no battered Dr Martens boots waiting for him. He knew there wouldn't be, it had apparently all been a product of his over active imagination, but he couldn't escape the disappointment that crashed over him.

“Who wants to be Prince Charming anyway?” He murmured as he climbed out of bed and started another boring day.

*JJ, Jack and Jessica will return in “Fake It”, the first book in their rock'n'roll romance series The Keswick Chronicles.*

*“Fake It” will be released on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015.*

*Get ready to meet your new favourite band...*

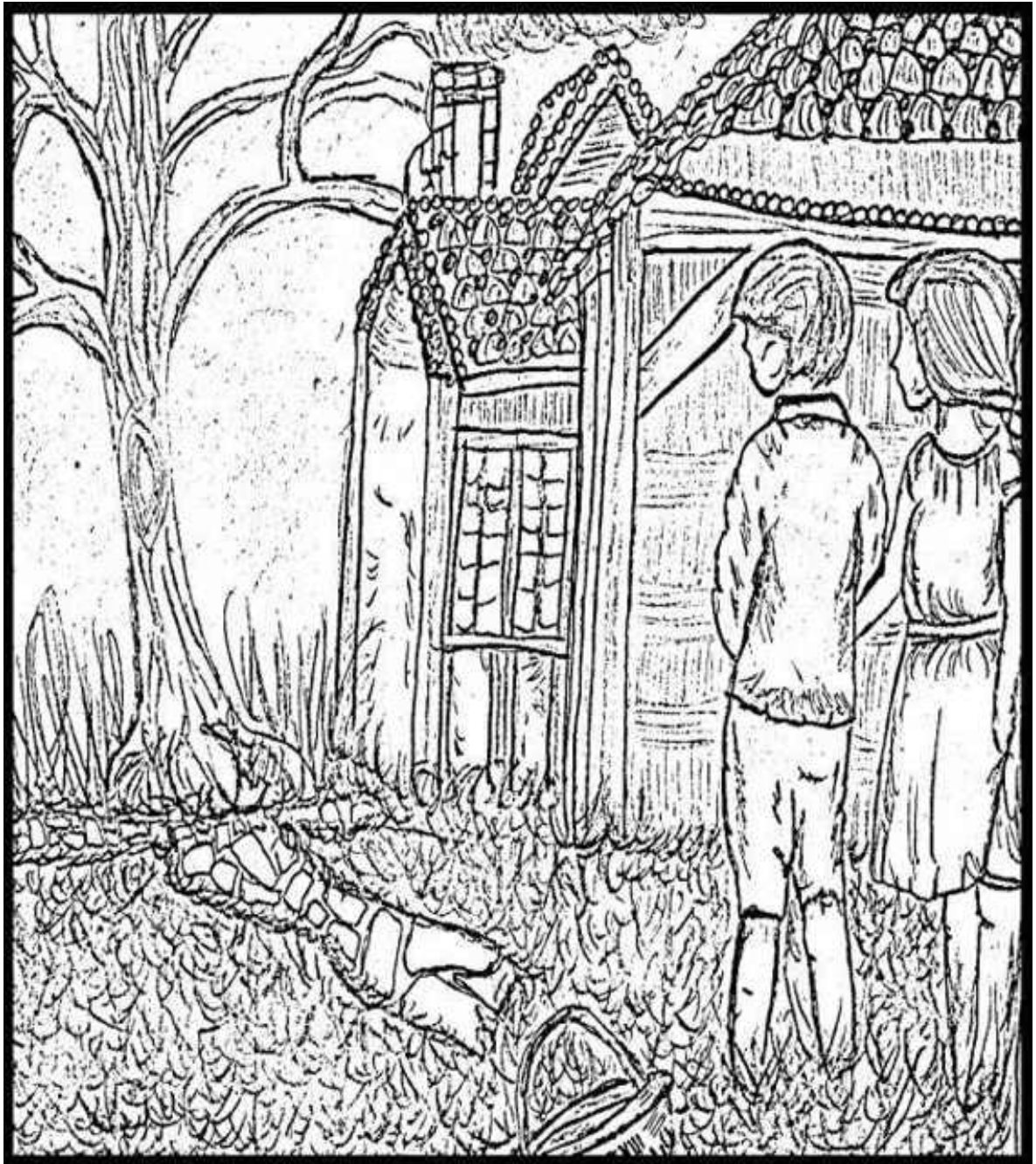
## Pixie

PyxiRose

Here my silhouette falls between blue and missing you, somewhere thick in between sleep and bliss.  
The colorless dust I breathe numbs me completely, utterly perfect in the arms of my pixie, deep in  
snowdrifts of sweet memories of you.  
Here in this place, this dwelling, with the sky on fire, I love my sands or at least the sound of my  
sea...here in the simple life that is me.  
Amongst these lines and time, yes where I dwell is hellishly understated.  
I talk of lush and you are there, I see your beauty above all else.  
Here your silhouette is cunningly impressive and I long for nothing else, but your honest presence.  
And I yield to you like summer to fall, the mere rapture of your affections.  
Oh yes, your grace is wanted here.  
The colorless dust I breathe numbs me completely, utterly perfect in the arms of my pixie, deep in  
snowdrifts of thoughts of you.  
Here in this heaven, this resting place, I ache for your embrace.  
Amongst words and lost translations, somewhere in my dreams I hear you call my name...  
In its depth, I read in between the lines and know that my pixie and I are one in the same...







# **No Turning Back**

**Nicole Daffurn**



# Weather Vain (Beast and the Beauty)

K.C. Finn

\*This Story is Written in UK English\*

A humble clerk knows that his future position in any company is fully dependent on how he looks when he enters the office. I always stand by the window when I finish dressing in the morning, under the arch of the roof in my third-floor bedroom. The gilded mirror sits in the corner just beyond this window, reflecting light into the modest room behind it, and onto me as I stand, appraising myself in its polished glass.

Two eyes in a fine amber shade. Dark brown hair smoothed into an austere backward sweep. A slim jaw and slightly-pointed chin. One thin, straight nose in a symmetrical position, sitting atop a thin moustache that I don't seem to be able to cultivate into a proper beard. An aspiring businessman ought to have better facial hair, but perhaps I'm still too young for the right kind of whiskers to grow in. Someday, I hope for better growth.

"Your tie isn't straight, darling dearest."

Annette. The brightest light in my life. I don't know how long she's been standing at the bedroom door, but now she swiftly moves into my vision, coming to stand between me and the mirror. She reaches out to straighten the maroon bow tie enveloping my shirt collar, patting her hands down the sleeves of my brown jacket afterwards. She smiles with angel's lips, her almond-shaped, hazel eyes encased in long lashes. Though her hair is kept back by a sensible knot, a recent memory flashes to my mind of those soft, auburn curls hanging down about her bare shoulders.

I pull her towards me, wrapping my arms tight around her waist. My little wife giggles into my chest, gasping as though she's breathing me in. I

feel her tender fingertips slip to the small of my back, fumbling up under the jacket and into the spot where my braces meet my trouser waist. The touch sends shivers through me, that she knows only too well. I nuzzle into her smooth neck, planting kisses on the perfect, porcelain skin there. She smells like citrus and lavender water.

“Khazran, darling,” she says, wriggling in my arms. “You have to breakfast, or you’ll be late for the office.”

It’s a feeble protest, and one we both know will do nothing to assuage my lips from travelling up and down her collarbone.

“I can’t help it, dear Annette,” I confess with a chuckle. “You’re too beautiful to resist. It’s my Turkish blood.”

She makes a little scoffing sound and pulls her neck away.

“You blame everything on your Turkish blood,” she chides.

I’m about to counter her argument when we both jump at the sudden rumbling noise overhead. A bright flash illuminates the dull morning, turning the whole view outside the window into white nothingness for the briefest moment. Annette moves out of my now-loose grip, pressing her fingertips to the window as she squints out into the wider world.

“It’s snowing on Forsyte Street,” she remarks.

I turn to follow her gaze. In our little avenue, the dull, cloudy morning reigns supreme. Three streets away, however, the lightning flash has brought a tirade of concentrated snowflakes down on the dozen houses of Forsyte Street. Beyond that, most of the other alleys and avenues are bathed in faint spring sunlight.

“Quite a blizzard,” I muse. “I wonder what they’ve done to upset Mr. Metero this time.”

Forsyte Street quite often gets the worst of the weather. Sunshine is reserved for only those who impress Mr. Metero, the weathermaster, the

most. I'm hoping that, after today, I'll be the one responsible for bathing our humble home in light.

"You ought to go," Annette tells me, straightening my clothes once more. "He'll make it rain if you're late for work."



The Metero Factory is home to several divisions of labour. The ground floor is for labourers; the hefty men who stock the coals and turn the engines for the great machines in the sky. The first floor is for clerical workers and administrative assistants, who feed the machines their instructions. The second floor houses the designers; the grand men and ladies who cultivate custom-made weather patterns to customer specifications, punching them in on coordinated cards to be fed into the great machines by the floor below. The third floor contains the private offices of Mr. Metero himself; what goes on there, I can only dream of as yet.

I work in the Correspondence Department on the first floor, dealing with requests for specific phenomena. It's my job to decide, on a case-by-case basis, whose weather requests are suitable projects for the weather architects to work on. Occasionally, I also have to work through the pile of complaints that are threatening to start a fire in the storage room, and today is one such horrible day. I am resolute, however, that I'll make a good, efficient job of it. I'll power through the complaints at such a record speed that Mr. Metero will have no choice but to commend the dedication of Khazran Steed.

I work eight hours a day, in an office so compact that a mouse wouldn't even envy its square footage. Surrounded by paper and inky stamps, I pause occasionally to look at the photograph on my desk. Annette and I had it

specially commissioned on the first anniversary of our marriage; it is a scene taken in deep snow in front of a Ferris wheel on the seventh of July. Mr. Metero provided the weather for a hefty sum of money, but it was worth it to see the look on Annette's face when the powdery substance fell all around us. I look at the satisfied smile on my younger face, remembering how proud I felt to have made it snow for her.

"That is the smile of a young man in love."

I don't recognise the croaking voice, but when I look up my breath catches a little in my throat. A hooked nose protrudes from between glossy eyes, so pale blue that one could almost call them silver. The gentleman wears a golden cravat about his neck and a crimson top hat covered in shiny brass gears. They click and hum all the time around a miniscule printing press, which is producing a thin strand of paper that dangles down to the old man's shoulder. He tears the paper strip off as I gape at him, reading the information before casting it down onto my floor.

"Mr. Metero, Sir," I stammer. "I had no idea you were inspecting the department."

"Far from it, dear boy," he croaks. "I have come to commend your efforts for my company, Mr. Steed. It is time I reviewed your employment here properly."

Dear boy. The affectionate name gives me hope that my little scheme to climb the career ladder has begun to take hold. I stand up to give Mr. Metero a little bow and the old man approaches, looking me over with a faint smile on his greying lip. He has a light, wispy beard that curls like white foam on his chin. His head bows a little as he appraises my desk, one liver-spotted hand reaching out to take hold of my photo frame.

"My, my," he says with a sigh. "Aren't you and your wife a pretty pair?"

“Thank you, Sir,” I say without delay, inclining my head again.

Mr. Metero holds the photograph up, comparing it to my current features, I suppose. His free hand reaches out, barely a half-inch from my bare chin, so close that I can feel the frozen air coming from his fingertips.

“You’re darker-skinned than you look in the company records,” he tells me.

“My grandmother was a Turk, Sir,” I answer. I try to sound apologetic of the fact, even though I rather like the hue of my skin in private.

“Still,” Mr. Metero muses. “There’s something very pleasant about your aspect, my boy.”

He touches me properly then, and an uncomfortable jolt hits my stomach at the contact. Only Annette ought to have her fingertips on my face, but it isn’t polite to rebuff one’s employer. Fortunately, the tape emanating from the old man’s hat has reached his elbow, and he backs away to rip it off and study it once more.

“It’s official!” he exclaims with sudden, hoarse joy. “The Empire has acquiesced to my request for sky engines over Africa! Look here, do you see?”

He holds out his latest paper strip, but all I can make out are strange, shorthand symbols that I don’t understand. I reply brightly all the same, “That’s wonderful, Sir.”

“I shall have to depart at once for the continent if I’m to be there in time to oversee the launch.”

Mr. Metero turns on his heel, ready to depart in his sudden excitement, but when he reaches my door just a pace or two away, he stops. His frosted eyes fall on my face and my stomach jolts again.

“I suppose,” he begins slowly, “that I shall need someone to take care of the factory whilst I’m gone.”

He can't possibly mean me, and yet the smile on his thin lips tells me otherwise. I raise my eyebrows, unable to vocalise the question that all my dreams might come true, if only for a week or so. Mr. Metero just nods, as though he can hear every word I'm thinking.

"You're a diligent chappie, Mr. Steed," he says merrily. "Why don't you come up to the top floor with me? We'll see if you're suited to the task."

I don't want to lose the opportunity, but it feels so impolite to just cry 'Yes' at the top of my lungs. Instead I clear my throat, wringing my hands together for the briefest moment.

"You're sure, Sir?" I ask humbly. "I'm just a simple clerk, really. I haven't a clue about the running of a factory."

"Precisely," Mr. Metero says, pointing a bony finger at me. "If I gave control to one of the designers, they'd have ideas above their station, be wanting to experiment!" He stamps his foot for emphasis. "Disgraceful! And give power to a labourer, well, he'd be taking liberties casting tropical sunbeams over his own back yard." Another stamp. "Criminal! We can't have that. But you, my lamb, you're in the middle. You know your place, and you'll stick to it for me, won't you?"

"Yes, Sir," I say, hardly daring to believe my luck. "Of course, Sir."

The gold and glass elevator is only for designers and senior staff usage. It operates by hand-crank from the ground floor, where a labourer is put in place to wind the locomotive device in both the upward and downward directions. Mr. Metero rings a little service bell from a panel within the contraption, which is labelled *Third Floor* in a curling, elegant script. The gilded box begins to ascend after mere moments, and I peer out of the glass panels in its doors to watch the forbidden floors above me coming into view.



We pass the designers' floor, where the architects of weather sit at their titled desks, pencils and calculators in hand, and then the scene is gone as a corridor the colour of aubergines comes into view. I chance a glance at Mr. Metro to find the old man watching me, a knowing smile playing at his lips. He surely understands how exciting this moment must be for one who hasn't witnessed the third floor before. He opens the elevator doors for us both, stepping back again to allow me first passage into the corridor ahead.

The hall leads onto a huge expanse. Here, at the head of the building, the ceiling has been removed to combine with the attic, giving rise to a ten foot space above where I stand. The Metro Factory's roof is riddled with thick, rectangular panels of glass that display the sunlit sky above. Between the glass, there are pockets of open air that let warmth and natural light stream in. I almost wonder what Mr. Metro does when it rains, but then I remember who he is. I'm sure that it never rains above the Metro Factory.

Through the floor, huge brass pipes rise up towards the holes in the glass ceiling. I recognise the polished metal as belonging to the weather engines below, where some of my fellow clerks feed the customised punch-cards into the machines. Even as I'm watching the pipes, there is a sudden rumble from within one of the nearest ones. A whipcrack sound hits me like a physical force, followed swiftly by a slim bolt of lightning that shoots from the pipe into the sky. The lightning continues to shoot upwards for several seconds, and some bursts are longer than others, beating out some sort of code into the heavens. This is how the machines in the sky receive their signals.

"How do you find it, dear boy?" Mr. Metro asks.

"Fascinating," I reply, too dumbfounded to even find another word to add.

The old man takes me by the elbow, weaving me through the jutting tubes as my head spins in all directions to watch the signals fire off. I stumble a little, my gaze suddenly snapping back to ground level, where I find that Mr. Metero has a little desk set up for himself amid the machines. It is an elegant piece of furniture, with polished oak and golden edging, and I find myself a little choked that he should think me worthy to sit at such a desk in his absence. He even has his own personal machine feeder atop the desk, ready to send custom weather out with his very own fingertips. There are fountain pens, paperwork, all manner of schematics and important documents strewn about. Everything is beautiful and elegant atop the weatherman's desk.

Except for the rose.

It sits in a glass dome at the far right corner: a single rose suspended by I know not what. It is withered and rotten, with almost all of its petals discarded into crumbling heaps of dead matter beneath its floating stem. It disgusts me to see it, but I find my eyes drawn to it all the same. What place does a thing of such displeasing aspect have in the realm of beauty? Mr. Metero moves to the glass dome, resting one withered hand on top of it as he too watches the floating, wilted flower.

"Tell me, Khazran," the old man begins. "What do you think of thunderstorms?"

I look into his glossy eyes, deciding that honesty is a man's true mark.

"Beastly things," I reply, "and a fitting horror for those that deserve it."

"And what of lightning?" Mr. Metero adds.

"Terrifying, Sir," I say.

"And rain?"

"The very Devil's invention."

Mr. Metero takes his hand away from the dome, stepping back towards me with a slow but graceful stride. The tape of news hanging from his brow is long and winding now, but he discards the hat and runs a withered hand through his thinning hair. For the first time since entering my office downstairs, the old creature looks troubled. When he finally acknowledges me again, it is from under his bushy, frowning eyebrows.

“You are a remarkably beautiful thing, Khazran,” he tells me. Before I can thank him for the compliment, he suddenly adds: “And you know it, too.”

“It’s hard not to, Sir,” I say, floundering a little, “when one is told it so often.”

The old man nods, a considered look pouting out his lips. His hand returns to hover over the top of the rose’s dome.

“You take great pride in yourself, do you not?” Mr. Metero begins. “I fear that my little rose would be deposed of its prideful place here, if I were to give you this desk for a week.”

Admittedly, I don’t like the idea of staring at the nearly-dead flower every day, but the opportunity to impress the old weathermaster is one I can’t pass up. I lean towards the dome, peering in at the crinkled petals in the hue of dried blood.

“I can abide it, Sir,” I reply.

“Abide,” he repeats, a little too darkly for my taste.

The smile that returns to Mr. Metero’s face is sharper than it was before. He recovers his top hat and flips it back into place, crossing past me to a drawer at the bottom of his desk. His crooked back arches like that of a cat’s as he fumbles in the dark drawer, eventually producing what appears to be a blank punch card. Shooing me out of his way, the busy little man sits down at his desk and begins to punch a series of holes into the card.

Occasionally, he stops and peers at the rose, then at me, before continuing. What results is a little brown card made more of holes than substance, with a complex pattern running through its centre, which almost looks like the tooth of a savage beast.

“Well that’s that,” the old man says suddenly.

Mr. Metero stands, flapping the card to and fro in the faint summer breeze as I watch it sway. He stills it then and turns, feeding it into the shining little engine on his desk, which waits patiently to receive its instructions. Though I have seen many a clerk feeding the machines downstairs, in this moment I feel that I am witnessing a spectacle like no other. The weatherman himself has created a forecast, and I’m about to see it come to life.

The card clicks into the feeder, disappearing through the slot. A few seconds pass as I stand, tensely awaiting the rumble from one of the brass pipes. It comes from a particularly thick one to our left, which rattles visibly under the strain of what must be building inside it. A tightness forms in the very pit of my stomach as I watch, grasping out to steady myself with the back of Mr. Metero’s chair. My fingers grip the solid wooden rim, digging in with fear as the pipe shakes itself into a frenzy, before suddenly letting rip with a force that makes me leap half out of my skin.

The lightning shoots into the sky, but some of it snakes a path into the room itself. It shudders all around me, bright as dawn after dark, blinding every sense as it illuminates the room so intensely that one would think the office had disappeared altogether. The pain of the light is too much, and I cover my ears against its buzzing, dropping to the ground in a ball to cower from its awesome presence. It is only when I feel a withered old hand on my shoulder that I dare to open my eyes again. I can see the huge office on

the edges of my vision, but the centre of my sight is still blinded by a shadow of the light.

“There now,” Mr. Metero croons. “The first of your lessons is taught.”

My skin tingles as I rise, and the old man helps me into his chair. I look down at my hands, relieved to find them undamaged by the fierce lightning blast, and then seek out the reflection of my face in the dome of the rose. As I take in my fine features, unblemished as always, I realise that something is different on the other side of the glass. The rose is renewed. Where the withered old stem once stood, a verdant green stalk stands proudly, thorns and all. The petals are pink and rosy once again.

“You replaced it,” I breathe, looking to Mr. Metero for guidance.

He shakes his head, resting a hand on the glass.

“My engines do not simply control the heavens,” he explains. “All nature is programmable, if one knows the correct codes.”

I try to process what he’s telling me, finding it hard to keep all my thoughts in a sensible order as I gape at the beautiful rose once more.

“You said something about a lesson,” I say as recollection dawns.

“Yes,” Mr. Metero answers. “Lesson the first: nature has a fine balance to its energy. In order to renew the rose, energy had to be extracted from somewhere else.”

I furrow my brow.

“But from where?” I ask.

The old man taps his hooked nose, still grinning.

“That’s your second lesson, and it isn’t for me to tell you,” he replies.

Before I can fathom all that I’ve seen and heard, Mr. Metero plucks a valise from under his desk and adjusts his hat. He begins to stride briskly from the desk, back towards the aubergine corridor where the elevator is

waiting. I rise from the chair to find my legs are shaking, crashing back down into its creaking curves as I grasp at the very air before me.

“Wait!” I cry. “You’re not going already, are you? What am I supposed to do?”

The old man doesn’t so much as look back, he just waves me off over his shoulder.

“Don’t fret, Khazran,” he shouts back. “I don’t do much around here anyway! Instructions are in the bureau in case of an emergency.”

When he reaches the elevator doors, I can barely make him out, save for the gleam in his glossy eyes. He tips the brim of his hat to me as he opens the golden contraption, and then he’s encased within its glass walls. As the weathermaster sinks out of view, I have the awful feeling that something very bad has happened to me, though I haven’t the faintest idea what it could be.

The life of a factory owner is not the glorious affair I had imagined it to be. I spend the rest of the afternoon looking out of the window in the huge third-floor space, and not a single person comes to visit or sends any kind of correspondence for me to attend to. Feeling like little more than the glorified babysitter of a sleeping giant, I am glad to board the busy omnibus that will trundle me home. The craft passes various bands of weather; it seems today that every street has its very own climate. The atmosphere on my own little avenue is far more cloudy than I would have expected. With a wry grin; I ponder the possibility of changing that tomorrow as I ascend the porch steps.

The door opens without my having to ring the doorbell, and as I enter, I am greeted by three terrified faces. Our two young maids and the cook’s assistant are gathered at the bottom of the staircase, glancing at me and then back up towards the top floor of the house. Startled by their strange

behaviour, we stand in an odd silence as I watch their trembling lips form the right shapes for hesitant speech.

“Mister Steed, Sir! You have to help us, Sir!”

“We didn’t know what to do with it, Sir!”

“We don’t know how it got in here, Sir!”

The tirade of fretting grows in volume as the three young women crowd around me, their pleading faces fuelled with frenzy. I raise my hand to try and stop them speaking, calling over their woes to make them talk one at a time, but it is only a noise from upstairs that forces them to stop.

With sudden haste, all mouths are fastened shut and the women look to the stairs again. The cook’s assistant clutches my arm in a most impertinent manner, fingers digging hard into the muscle. The noise comes again, and this time I hear it clearly. A thunder-like rumble, as though something momentarily heavy is walking around on the top floor of my house.

“Please, Mister,” one of the maids pleads. “Butler and Cook went to get help, but they ain’t come back, Sir. We reckon they must have run away, Sir.”

“Run away?” I ask, almost laughing. “How absurd! Run away from what, girl?”

None of them will say, they simply keep looking to the stairs.

“Where is Annette?” I ask.

Still no reply. I fling the cook’s assistant away from my arm and she clutches at the door frame instead, as though she needs something to steady herself upon. I look into her frightened eyes as my frustration burns.

“Where is Mrs. Steed?” I demand. “Girls, where is your mistress?”

The cook’s assistant leans forward again, her lips barely moving as the whispered words come tumbling out.

“We think it got her, Sir.”

I shake my head immediately, pushing past them all towards the stairs. They begin the tidal wave of woes again, fretting after me like fishwives at a market stall as I take the first few steps. I stop sharply, turning to stare them all down.

“Now see here,” I chide. “I don’t know what hysteria has enraptured you three, but I mean to put a stop to this foolishness now. I shall go upstairs and explore the situation for myself.”

“Be careful, Sir,” one of the maids whispers. I’m ashamed to say it unnerves me as I continue up the stairs.

The occasional rumble is coming from my bedroom, and I can only surmise that some sort of pest has found entrance and frightened the staff. At the closed door to the room, I put my ear to the wood and listen hard for noises. There is a faint snuffling, and a panting like that of a wounded dog, but no snarls or howls erupt from within. I consider knocking, but it seems unreasonable to think that whatever’s inside would stand on propriety. Instead, I push the door open, standing in the archway as I let it swing wide to reveal the room.

My first instinct is to charge the thing I see, and I race forward to grab a chair before my good sense returns. The creature before me is at least my size, and I upend the chair to poke its legs out in front of me for the sake of defence. A curved, hairy back full of auburn fur rises and falls with heavy breathing. The animal has been roused by my entry, but it is reluctant to turn and reveal its head. We stand in a defensive stalemate as I take in its sharp, clawed feet and long, strong limbs.

No wonder the maids were terrified. I have never seen a beast of this likeness before. But where is my Annette? An overview of the room tells me that no blood has been shed, and the beast is scarcely big enough to have swallowed a grown woman whole. Is she hiding somewhere to escape



from the rancid thing? Or did she leave the house with the butler and the cook? Growing braver in view of the creature's frightened posture, I knock the chair-legs to the ground a few times to get its attention. Its hairy back flinches with every sound.

"All right, beast," I snarl courageously. "What have you done with my wife?"

The creature's massive shoulders slump down, and I start as it quickly rotates on its paws. Its head is like that of a lion, framed by a shaggy brown mane, which hangs down as it droops its face towards the floor. It looks like an oversized dog, begging its master for forgiveness, and I edge closer, with the chair raised high, to get a better look at its face. As I do, the strangest scent fills my senses. Citrus and lavender water.

"No," I murmur, rage bubbling in my blood. "You've eaten her, you wretched thing!"

I smash forward with the chair, ready to bring it down upon the head of the beast in my blind rage. When the creature senses my attack, I am treated to the full extent of its massive strength. With a single paw, the beast flings me and the chair clean across the room, and I land with a painful crash at my back. A shattering sound follows, and I raise my hands to shield my head as shards from my beautiful mirror come raining down about my face. Cowering in a ball amid the debris, I don't hear the beast approaching until I can smell Annette's scent near me once again. Shaking and fearing the end, I lower my hands to look into the eyes of the thing that is coming to kill me.

Those eyes. Those almond-shaped eyes with their bright hazel hue. I know those eyes, and I have never seen them look so sad as they do now, framed amongst fur and nestled above the frowning muzzle of the beast. I shake my head. The beast only nods hers, extending a paw to sweep away

some of the glass that has collected beside me. I don't understand what has happened, but the expression in Annette's eyes is impossible to misinterpret. The beast has not taken her; she has become it.

Where her paw was a moment ago, there is now a crumpled slip of writing paper. I can hear my heart thumping in my head as I lean forward to pick it up, unfurling the message and smoothing out its creases. A curling, shaky script greets my eyes.

*Lesson the second: know the parameters of nature before you broker a deal.*

The letterhead bears the Metero logo. The beautiful rose in the glass dome flashes through my memory. In order to get from nature, one must give it to. Mr. Metero has given my Annette's beauty to a mere table decoration. At my request.

"Annette," I say. The beast looks bright, her eyes gleaming gratefully at the sound of her name on my lips. "Can you speak, darling girl?"

When her thick, dark lips open, all that sounds is a mournful wail. The sparkle of her sharp, canine teeth makes me wince with fear, and Annette shuffles back on her haunches away from me, turning her head. I try to reach for her, but I don't know where to hold her. It would be wrong to soothe her the way one would a horse or a dog, but she has no shape that I recognise in this four-legged, arch-backed form. My hand falls away in mid-air, despair deadening every sense in my body.

"This cannot be so," I declare, scrambling to my feet. "This is Metero's doing, and I'll fix it, Annette, I swear."

The beast lumbers back across the room, hopping up onto the wide bed to curl in a ball. She is hiding her face from me again, one huge paw atop her muzzle, but I can see the wetness of tears in her fur. The weathermaster has turned her into an animal, but left her the human ability to cry about it.

When I pull a blanket up over the lower part of her body, Annette retracts her paw and gives me another sad look. It hurts me to remember how beautiful her face had been that very same morning, and it stabs at my heart to know that she is still the woman I love within this hideous casing.

“I’m going back to the factory at once,” I tell her. “I’m going to find a way to reverse this.”

The maids and the cook’s assistant refuse to believe what has happened, but they take their orders from me nonetheless. After I’m certain that food and water has been provided for Annette, I leave again for the factory in the first coach I can flag down. The labourers on the bottom-most floor of the factory work around the clock in shifts to keep the sky engines firing, and I spot a door that must have been left open for ventilation. I cross the lawn, veering from the usual path that I have taken for so many months at this place, slipping into the doorway to access the worker’s floor.

Smoke, steam and the glisten of turning gears fill my senses. The strongest of the labourers turn cranks and push giant wheels in constant circles, whilst others stoke the great central fire with a never-ending stream of coal. It is hard to find someone who isn’t totally occupied by their duties, until I spot a sleeping figure by a gold and glass contraption in the corner. The lift-operator is still here, taking a break from the hand-operated pulleys and cranks.

“You, there,” I say as I reach him, prodding the man in the shoulder.

His heavy-lidded eyes flicker open, observing me with dark, dilated pupils.

“Take me to the third floor,” I demand.

He makes an indignant, scoffing sound, folding his thickset arms.

“Only Mr. Met’ro goes to’t third floor,” he counters.

I stand at my full height, looking down on him with my best sneer of derision.

“I am Mr. Metero’s temporary replacement,” I tell him. He remains unresponsive. “My name is Khazran Steed.”

At this last utterance, the labourer finally gets to his feet.

“Khazran Steed,” he mutters as he crosses to the lift controls. “Well, Sir, that’s a differ’nt matter, in’t it?”

I am pleased, at least, that he knows my name, but it does make me wonder why he’s heard of me. I step into the glass-fronted lift box, holding on to a gilded handle as the labourer gives the mechanism its first hard crank. With a shunt that sends a sick shiver up through my spine, the lift begins to ascend through the empty floors where the clerks and architects work during the day. The aubergine corridor of Metero’s private floor is bathed in shadows as the lift comes to rest beside it. I step out into the darkness, grateful that the glass ceiling ahead offers me a little light from the clouded moon outside.

The huge expanse of the roof space is eerie as the gathering dark settles in. It seems to me that this street is darker in atmosphere than all the others around it, and I wonder if Mr. Metero is able to control the moonlight as well as the clouds. My footsteps echo among the metallic hum of the dormant weather pipes, and I weave amongst them until I reach the weathermaster’s desk. He told me that emergency instructions were somewhere in the bureau. I hadn’t thought to explore them until now, but I’m hoping there’s some way to contact him within those notes.

Ripping through drawer after drawer, I don’t end my furious search until loose papers, trinkets and stationary are scattered everywhere around me in the darkness. Nowhere in the mess can I find anything marked with words like ‘protocol’ or ‘emergency’, but I scan every paper with the hope

of finding a telegram address for Africa. Metero might even have arrived there already if he elected to take his airship this morning. Again, I find nothing that can help me, moving to the very last scrap of paper with fading hope fuelling every nerve. I run my eyes over its message:

*Lesson the third: There is beauty in everything, if only one has vision enough to see it.*

This is meant me for me, I know by Metero's quaint phrasing and the matching, cursive script to the note Annette had been given.

"You planned this," I whisper. "You evil rotter, you heartless cur, you —"

"That's quite enough of that, dear boy," a frail voice interjects.

Jumping to my feet, I search the shadows for the old man whose voice I know. A pinkish glow greets me to the left, where the outline of the floating rose comes into view. Two liver-spotted hands hold the rose's glass dome, and Metero's face is cast into shadow by its crimson light. His glossy eyes sparkle as his thin lips expand into a greedy smile.

"My employees are very important to me, Khazran," he explains, "as is the very ethos of my beloved factory."

I watch his skeletal face as he approaches.

"You should be in Africa," I say weakly.

The old man chuckles. "There was no appointment in Africa," he chides. "Don't you see yet, Khazran? It's a test. Do you honestly think I'd leave the most destructive technology in the nation in the hands of the likes of *you*?"

The last word expounds from his tongue as though it is laced with poison.

"A test," I repeat, my brow furrowed. "A test of what, may I ask?"

“Perspective,” the old man replies. “You find thunder and rain to be hideous things. You wished the sight of a dying bloom to be removed from your vision.”

I look down at the note in my hands again. *There is beauty in everything.*

“So you altered Annette,” I conclude. “You have made her ugly so that I might learn that beauty isn’t everything.”

I walk to meet his stride, looking down at the glowing rose between us. A smile of sheer relief crosses my face as I watch the bright flower hovering there.

“So what happens now?” I ask, pointing to the flower. “When I learn to appreciate the thunder, the beasts and the ugly things of life, you’ll release her beauty again from this jar?”

Mr. Metero passes me by, setting the rose down on his desk. He settles into his chair, removing his top hat as he reclines to observe me. Not even a hint of a smile passes over his lips.

“No,” he says plainly.

Something heavy forms in the pit of my stomach.

“What do you mean?” I plead.

“Lesson the fourth,” the old man begins. “A deal once brokered, cannot be undealt.”

I take his meaning, but I cannot accept it. The vision of Annette’s hazel eyes, surrounded by dark fur, sends a retching shudder through my bones. The old man raises his palms, his withered shoulders rising in a shrug.

“This isn’t some fairy-tale, dear boy,” Metero whispers. “I need all my employees to appreciate the darkness and obscurity of this world as much as the pleasantries and the light. Annette will remain as she is for the rest of *your* natural life.”

“My life?” I ask.

The old man nods. “I suggest you learn to love her all over again,” he says, “because if you turn on her now, she might just end you in order to reclaim that which you bartered away. She knows all about the terms of what you did; I visited her shortly after the transaction took place. The fact that she hasn’t killed you already suggests that she loves you very much, Khazran. It is my hope that her devotion is not deeply misplaced in you.”

I walk home in the semi-darkness with the odd feeling that the moon is lighting my way, but I try to ignore the prospect of the absolute control that the weathermaster now has over my life. My life with the beast. Annette is condemned to her fur-and-claw prison for as long as she loves me, and I am challenged with the prospect of loving her back. For my life, my job and my own sanity, I can do nothing now but try and live by the lessons which Metero has set me.

When I return to my top-floor bedroom, my wife lies sleeping in a heap, beneath the blankets where I left her. Her arched back heaves with every breath, fur sliding against the sheets to make a peculiar scratching sound. Someone has opened the bedroom window, and a trail-shaped clearing in the broken glass leads towards the empty frame of my prized mirror. I stand before its lack of reflection, glad that I cannot partake of the vanity which has made me a victim in Metero’s game. A final letter is secured to the gilded top-edge of the ruined mirror, and I pull it down and unfold it with a snap. Annette gives a sleepy yowl behind me as I read the curling writing by the light of the moon.

*Lesson the fifth: he conquers, who conquers himself.*





**Goldie**

**By Samantha Kette**

As I sat in the cold and bare iron cage, on the paper thin excuse for a mattress, I thought back about how I had met George and his brothers. It had been a chance encounter over a year before, but I had known it was love at first sight. I had always had a predisposition for the bad boys.

It was late October, and the wind was brutal. Walking towards my favorite store, I stood outside of Bling, the jewelry store that I dreamed of, but could never afford. Hat pulled over my ears, I barely heard the voice that spoke as the man sidled up to stand beside me.

“A pretty necklace for a beautiful lady.” He smiled, and two dimples stood out on either cheek.

I was immediately smitten, and couldn’t help the grin that spread across my face. “I could never afford that,” I sadly admitted.

We talked in front of the window, the light reflecting on his face from the sun hitting all of the precious stones on display. The world seemed to fade away, and as the chill in the air began to set into my bones, I bid him farewell, but not before exchanging numbers.

My alarm went off the next morning at eight o’clock sharp, reminding me that it was time to get ready for my daily grind. My job paid minimum wage and my home was in the seediest neighborhood, but at least I could afford a roof over my head, if barely. As I stood and stretched, my doorbell rang.

*Who the hell is here this early? Where’s my gun?* I frantically looked for my gun, afraid of what awaited me on the other side of the door. Anything was possible in my neighborhood.

Grabbing my robe, I padded to the entryway and looked through the peephole. A delivery man stood on the other side, a package in his hand.

After greeting the man and signing the proffered sheet, I took the package and sat at my sorry excuse for a kitchen table.

There was a small card attached.

*For the beautiful lady, coffee at The Buzz tomorrow, ten o'clock?*

I smiled, imagining the man I had met the day previous, before reality began to place doubts in my daydream. *That isn't for you. The delivery man made a mistake. Don't open it. The owner will be pissed.*

Throwing caution to the wind, I gently peeled the tape away from one end of the box and carefully unfolded the paper. Inside, a small nondescript box beckoned to be opened. My hand covered my mouth in awe; the dainty necklace from the window lay inside the velvet lined box. The amethyst twinkled in the light filtering through my blinds, casting colorful rainbows through my kitchen. With shaking fingers, I reached out and touched the precious gem and caressed the thin silver chain.

That was the beginning of my relationship and the end of all I had ever known.



*The man gave me a necklace worth thousands. What can coffee hurt?*

I met the stranger for coffee the next morning at the local coffee shop—against my better judgment. I spotted his green eyes across the room and walked straight to his table. To my dismay, we weren't alone.

"I'm George," he introduced himself to me for the first time. "This is my younger brother Gregory, and my older brother Bryan." He motioned to each as he introduced them, and while Gregory looked friendly, if a bit young, Bryan looked intimidating. His tall frame barely fit at the small table, and his hands held the coffee mug as if it were a small girl's tea set.

"Um, hi," I mumbled. "I'm Goldie."

George pulled out my chair and winked, immediately relaxing me. There was something special about the twinkle in his eye and the deep dimples in his cheeks that made me immediately trust him.

“Thank you for the beautiful gift,” I gazed into his eyes, lost in their dark and light swirls. I was so lost that I missed the disapproving look that Bryan shot his way.

“What did I tell you?” Bryan growled.

“You’re cool, aren’t you Goldie?” Gregory finally spoke in a soft voice.

Having no idea what he meant, I answered and hoped that Bryan would stop staring at me like he wanted to eat me. “Of course I am.” *Oh, what have I gotten myself into this time?*

The conversation ceased while I played in the sugar that had spilled on the table. The brothers seemed to be having a silent, private conversation through glares and grunts.

Looking down, I realized I had drawn a picture of a heart, felt a blush creep up my neck before wiping the drawing away and looking up at George. He smiled and winked, and I felt someone touch my foot under the table.



Things progressed quickly, my connection to the gorgeous man growing with each encounter. Even his brothers, Bryan in particular, weren’t enough of a deterrent for my heart. Days turned into weeks, and after a month of meeting for lunches with his brothers, George finally called to invite me to dinner alone.

I stared at my reflection in the mirror, judging every angle, and finally decided on the fifth dress I had tried on. *This is so stupid. This isn’t the first time you’ve met, dummy.* I blew out a nervous breath, ran my fingers

through my hair, and had a moment of panic as the doorbell rang. Though I had seen him a number of times already, we had never been alone. I had never felt the intimacy or pressure of an actual date, until I opened the door to find him standing on my stoop with a single calla lily.

“You look ravishing.” He smiled and lifted my hand to his generous lips.

“As do you, I mean, you look handsome,” I stammered, wanting to smack myself.

He walked me to his car and opened the door like a gentleman. Without consciously thinking about what I was doing, I glanced in the backseat expecting to find Gregory and Bryan. George slid fluidly into the leather seat next to me, his cologne tantalizing my senses and reminding me of a rainy day in the forest.

“Where are we heading?” He had kept our location a secret from me, and I was curious as to our destination. I secretly hoped the night would be filled with something more original than dinner and a movie.

George laughed as if he had heard my thoughts. “Do you like art?”

I had never entertained an opinion either way, so I told him as much. “I’m always up for something new, though,” I laughed.

I watched the city lights blur as we sped down the highway in his sports car, the world ours for the taking. Twenty minutes and a great conversation later, we arrived at a swanky new art show, complete with a valet and red carpet.

“Is this for someone famous?” I felt a bit out of place, with all of the glitz surrounding me, but tried to maintain my composure.

George just laced his fingers through mine and led me inside. I couldn’t help the gasp that escaped my lips as I took in the beauty of the room.

Colors, bright and vibrant, stood out among the crisp white canvases, while modern art pieces served as centerpieces in the large space.

“This is beautiful,” I spoke aloud as my eyes darted from canvas to canvas, seemingly unable to decide where they wanted to focus.

“Yes, it is,” he agreed, and as I glanced at him, I realized he was looking only at me, ignoring the scene before us.

I felt the blush coloring my face as I smiled nervously. “Do you know the artist?” I fidgeted, uncomfortable having his attention only on me.

“I don’t, but I am a fan.” He led me by each of the canvases, all equally beautiful and captivating in their own way. We continued the evening talking about the different works of art, sipping the complimentary champagne, and laughing with each other.

As the host announced the closing of the gallery, George turned to me. “Which is your favorite?”

I took a moment, looking around one last time, though I already knew my answer. “That one.” I pointed to the piece of the woman sitting on a rock in the middle of the forest with her back to the artist, a lone flower growing under her outstretched hand. It moved me with its simplicity and beauty.

“Good choice.” He smiled, placing his hand on my lower back, as he ushered me outside and back to the vehicle. The drive home was filled with conversation about the gala, but my stomach was secretly turning, wondering if he would kiss me goodnight.

As we walked to the door, I felt my hand tick, fingers jerking uncontrollably, as if they had a mind of their own and wanted to grasp his hair and pull his lips to mine. We stood together, and he finally leaned down to embrace and kiss me as I had never been kissed before. I had kissed many men, but this was *just right*, and I melted in his embrace.

Too soon, the moment ended, we bid each other goodnight, and I fumbled with my keys trying to unlock my front door. Once inside, I collapsed against the closed door and sat on the floor, still light-headed from the spine-tingling moment.



I awakened the next morning, a smile on my face as I stretched and blinked from the sun's rays caressing me with the dawn's light. As I plodded to the bathroom, I giggled, remembering the night's events. *God but the man can kiss.*

I was drinking my morning java when the doorbell rang. Opening the door, I found a large package waiting on my stoop, wrapped in plain brown paper with no card. I brought it back into the living room, where the morning news was blaring about the latest crime that had been committed.

I gasped as I ripped the paper away and found myself staring at the picture from the art gallery, the exact one that I had expressed interest in when George had asked my favorite. Without conscious effort, my ears perked up and caught the tail end of the newscast.

The news team was standing in front of the art gallery where we had been, interviewing a witness who had witnessed three men running from the building under the cover of darkness. The alarm had awakened him from his sleep, and he had managed to see the three strangers running down the alley next to the gallery. The reporter went on to describe the perpetrators' height and weight, but I was no longer listening; the picture taunted me, the man of my dreams haunting my memory.

After hiding the stolen painting behind my sofa, I picked up the phone and dialed. I had to speak with him, had to have an explanation. I wanted him to tell me I was wrong, that there was a reasonable explanation. After

four rings, I gave up and ended the call. Pacing, phone in hand, I came to the decision to wait until I spoke to George before calling the police.

Minutes later, my doorbell rang again, and my adrenaline coursed through my veins as paranoia rampaged my nerves. I placed my shaking hand on the doorknob; sure the police were standing on my stoop, ready to search my home. Taking a deep breath, I opened the door and sighed with relief and confusion. George stood with his brothers behind him, and cleared his throat as he waited for me to acknowledge his presence.



“Just sit down and let me explain,” George pleaded, sitting on the ottoman in front of my chair.

I was breathing loudly, my nerves shot and feelings all over the spectrum. I couldn’t imagine the man in front of me being the same gentleman from the night before. My brain couldn’t make sense of my feelings.

“I told you she wasn’t cool,” Bryan grumbled from his spot in the corner, where he leaned against the wall staring at his fingernails before biting and spitting the nail on the carpet.

“Just give her time, bro,” Gregory argued, smiling cautiously as he gazed at me with hope in his eyes.

I took a calming breath, looked into George’s eyes, and gave him the benefit of the doubt. “Explain, then.”

George blew out a relieved breath and began. “My brothers and I were orphaned long ago. Bryan took care of me and Gregory in the family cabin. Money was scarce, so we learned how to support ourselves through less traditional means. We were too young to work.” His eyes begged for my understanding.



“So, what, you steal for a living?” I couldn’t believe that I was actually feeling bad for the men in front of me, as my eyes wandered, landing on each of the three men. If I looked closely, I could see a memory of the lost boys in each of them.

“Yes, but only from those that can afford it. We steal only what we need, but I admit, I slipped last night. I wanted to give you your heart’s desire, and I made a rash decision. Gregory and Bryan showed up at the last minute and helped me bail before I got caught.” George sat back, done telling his story, as short as it was, and waited for my response.

I didn’t know what to say. *Sure, I am involved with a family of criminals, and even now, his eyes are making me want to take him in the next room. Lovely.* “I understand why you did it, but must you continue?”

“Yes, miss high-and-mighty, we must continue. It *is* our livelihood, and we are damn good at it,” Gregory spit venomously. His hatred of me was apparent.

“Why do you hate me so much? What have I done to you?” I couldn’t think of anything I had done that would warrant his malicious attitude.

“You are making George do foolish things, even if you ain’t doing it on purpose, and *that* pisses me off. We don’t know how serious you are about him, or us, and it’s dangerous!”

George interrupted Gregory’s rant, “She has done nothing wrong, big brother, and I would appreciate it if you didn’t speak to her in that tone.” George’s own tone was calm, but the threat lay just below the surface.

Wanting to de-escalate the situation, I made my feelings known to everyone, including myself. “I want nothing but good things for all of you. As far as George, well, I think I love him.”

I couldn’t believe what I had just said. *I love him? Really? So soon? Impossible? Is it impossible? How do I know?* Thoughts tumbled through

my mind, but were stopped in their tracks as George leaned forward and pulled me to him, his tongue dancing with mine in another sizzling kiss.

He pulled back and grinned, before looking at his brothers and pulling me into his lap. “Guess that makes you one of us now!”

Bryan seemed as happy as George, but Gregory took one look at us and stalked from the room.

I couldn’t help it, and in the face of Bryan’s enthusiasm, I smiled back. George kissed me again, and I could feel his desire rising as the kiss deepened. Bryan cleared his throat, but we were so lost in the kiss that he finally gave up and left as well. George picked me up, my legs wrapping around his waist of their own accord, and carried me upstairs. I directed him between breaths, and when next our mouths separated, I was lying on my bed staring into George’s lust filled eyes.



Waking from my short nap, I smiled and kissed George’s swollen lips. “I bet your brothers heard every bit of that. I wasn’t exactly quiet.” I felt the crimson creeping on to my cheeks, giving away my sense of modesty.

“They know better than to be close enough to hear anything they shouldn’t,” George reassured me, his deep timbre and naked chest warming my blood again.

I knew there were things that I should be worried about, but I couldn’t bring myself to care. “What are we going to do?” I asked aloud, not really expecting an answer.

“I am going to do everything to make you happy. I want you to have everything you have ever wanted.” George stared deep into my eyes as he continued, and professed his love, as I had so bluntly earlier in front of his brothers.

The woman in me gave a sigh, and my heart felt too full. I wanted to hold him so tightly that we became one person, never to be separated again. “We should probably get downstairs. Who knows what your brothers are getting in to,” I regretfully admitted.

We both dressed and kissed long and deep one last time before leaving the confines of my bedroom and heading downstairs. I walked into the kitchen and gasped. Food from the cabinets and refrigerator was strewn on my counters, and Gregory and Bryan were stuffing their faces with food from bowls.

“I hope you found what you were looking for,” I grumbled as I began picking up and putting away the food.

“Well, we had to sort through all of your healthy shit to find the real food,” Bryan mumbled between bites of what looked like oatmeal. He had the biggest bowl I had in the cupboards, and was scarfing down the steaming oats.

“So sorry my selection wasn’t to your liking,” my mood immediately soured. I loved George, but his older brother got on my last nerve.

“He’s just grouchy, ignore him. Thank you for your hospitality and your kindness,” Gregory smiled, bits of oat stuck in his front teeth.

I couldn’t help but smile. While Bryan pissed me off, Gregory was endearing himself to me with his adorable demeanor. He was the youngest of the three, and obviously the most gentle.

George stood behind me and nipped at my ear, laughing as the blush rose up my neck. “Stop that,” I whispered, squeezing from between his body and the counter to finish cleaning. I didn’t know what the next day would hold, but my worries over being discovered with the painting had faded away as I became caught up in the world of three men—one whom I couldn’t imagine another day without.



After spending the remainder of the day with the brothers three, George and I bid the men farewell and left them at my house to head out for a dinner alone. I had chosen the local seafood restaurant, and my stomach growled constantly on the drive, making George laugh every time.

“You would think you never ate, if you listened to what your stomach had to say!”

I lightly smacked him on the arm. “It’s just been a long day, and I’m used to eating dinner earlier than this.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were hungry earlier?” He looked at me and I saw concern in his deep blue eyes.

“We were a bit, um, occupied.” I blushed. He knew exactly what we were doing, for the second time that day, so I didn’t feel the need to elaborate. He snorted and chuckled, earning himself another smack on the arm.

Finally, twenty minutes later, we pulled into the mostly empty parking lot. The Friday evening rush had come and gone by the time we arrived, so there was no wait for a table. The staff all seemed tired and thankful that the evening was winding down as they cleaned their stations and counted their tips.

We ordered and talked until our food arrived. “So where do we go from here?” I spoke between bites of the most delicious shrimp and potatoes I had ever eaten.

Before he could answer, his phone let out a shrill ring, and he reached into his pocket and answered, holding up his finger for me to wait for my answer.

“Yes. Yes. What? I understand. We’ll be there as soon as we can.” He hung up, but I could tell the situation was a bad one just by the look on his

face.

“What’s wrong, George?” My nerves began to fray and some part of me knew that the news would not be something I wanted to hear.

“We have to go. I’ll tell you in the car,” he raised his hand and called over the waitress, demanding our check and gathered his things, slapping the money on the table when the bill was presented. “Come on, I’m sorry, but we have to go.”

I stood and followed him, without question and without finishing my meal, until we were safely in the car. Then I demanded answers. “Okay, now what the hell is going on? You’re worrying me.”

“Gregory is in trouble. He’s at your house, but he’s in bad shape. Bryan called.” He sped through traffic, weaving in and out of cars and forcing me to grip the oh-shit handle with more force than I was comfortable.

“Slow down before we get in an accident and don’t make it there at all,” I pleaded.

He looked over and nodded before letting up on the throttle.

After what was merely minutes, but felt like hours, we pulled up at my house. George jumped from the car, barely remembering to turn off the engine, even if he did leave the keys in the ignition for me to grab. I followed him through the side door and into the kitchen, where a macabre scene met my eyes. I gasped and almost fainted at the sight of so much blood.

Gregory lay in a heap on the tile, a trail of blood from the door to his position. His head was bleeding profusely, as was a deep wound in his side that looked like some sort of stab wound. His hair was matted with crimson and dried in patches, and his eyes were purple and swollen almost completely shut. He still managed a smile at the sound of my voice and raised one scratched up arm to hold my hand.

“What the hell happened?” George was clearly angry and overwhelmed with emotion, so I simply waited for Bryan’s answer and sat holding Gregory’s hand. “Why haven’t you taken him to the hospital? Where were you when this happened?” The questions came in rapid succession, giving Bryan no time to answer in between.

“Hold on so I can answer,” Bryan barked. “He went to Don’s. I don’t know what happened because I was eating dinner and didn’t know where he had gone. He’s a grown ass man, and I wasn’t watching him.” Bryan took a breath and then continued, his eyes flashing in anger. “I didn’t take him to the hospital because he begged me not to. We can’t afford a police report, and he was smart enough to know that.”

I knew why they couldn’t afford a police report and didn’t want to ask any questions. I sat, brushing the blood encrusted hair from Gregory’s forehead while trying to comfort him on the hard, cold tile floor.

“Why the hell would he go to Don’s? I was supposed to meet with the bastard tomorrow, not Gregory!” I didn’t understand what George was talking about, but I got the distinct feeling that Don was not a man I ever wanted to meet under any circumstances.

Gregory tried to speak, only managing to mumble some unintelligible words and grumbles, but it calmed the other two brothers down, and he smiled up in my direction. No doubt that he couldn’t actually see me through his swollen and beaten eyelids.

“Okay, well, we need to get him some medical attention,” I interrupted. “I have a first aid kit upstairs in the bathroom.” Bryan left immediately without a cross word to get the kit, which surprised me. I murmured encouragement to Gregory as we waited for his brother to come back.

“Thank you,” emotion clogged George’s voice as he stared at me sprawled on the kitchen floor, his little brother’s head in my lap. I smiled

back at him as Bryan entered the kitchen and thrust the first aid kit at me.

I pulled out the gauze, steri-strips, and alcohol wipes and began to clean and dress Gregory's head wound. For the stab wound, I had to direct Bryan to my sewing kit and hope that nothing internal was damaged as I sewed his wound closed.

After dressing his wounds and cutting his blood soaked shirt from Gregory's body, George and Bryan carried him to the guest room upstairs to rest and returned to the living room, where I waited for an explanation.



"Tell me who Don is, and why he almost killed your brother," I began as soon as George and Bryan sat down. I wanted answers. In a matter of days, my life had gone from boring and predictable to the exact opposite. *I'll think about that later.* I snapped myself from my thoughts and focused on what Bryan was saying.

"Don is the local drug lord. We needed money in a bad way, and took out a loan from the wrong person. Our next payment was due yesterday." Bryan stated it matter-of-factly, as if it were the most normal thing in the world to know a drug lord, much less be involved with him.

I felt my mouth hanging agape and closed it. "Wait, so he beat the crap out of Gregory over a payment that is a day late? Doesn't he give you a grace period?" I knew the question was a stupid one the moment it left my mouth. *How the hell am I supposed to know the ins and outs of dealings with a drug lord?*

Bryan grunted and rolled his eyes as George gently answered my question. "No, he prefers his payments a day early. I don't know why Gregory went to Don's, but if we don't pay him tomorrow, we'll have more to worry about." He scrubbed his hands down his face before continuing. I

could tell he was tired, and he looked as if he had aged years over the few hours since the restaurant. “I am so sorry that I brought this to your doorstep.”

I walked to him and sat on his lap, placing a kiss on his cheek. “I don’t blame you, and I will take you with whatever baggage you have. I love you, and we will figure this out,” I promised. I didn’t know how we would figure it out, but I knew I was in it for the long haul. *I will do anything for this man*, I thought with clarity as I laid my head against his shoulder.

“Unless your girlfriend, here, has thousands of dollars to hand over, I have a plan to get the money we owe Don,” Bryan offered, if a bit cynically.

“Well, then, let’s hear it,” I cut George off from whatever he had planned to say. *Take that, Bryan. I am here to stay.*

Bryan seemed taken aback at my acceptance of everything, but continued. “There is a huge shipment of diamonds that comes in once a month to the biggest jewelry store in Chicago. Tomorrow is the monthly delivery day, and I have an inside track on where they are kept.”

The three of us sat in silence. I was thinking over his plan. I had never even imagined having the conversation we were having, and definitely never considered committing a crime. I had always been a law-abiding citizen. *Hell, I even recycle and pick up litter from my yard.*

“I think it will work, but I don’t want Goldie anywhere near it,” George finally broke the silence. “She’s done enough.”

I started to argue, but he placed his finger over my lips to stop me. “Listen, love. If anything goes south, I want you as far away from me as possible. I couldn’t bear to hurt you in any way.” My heart melted as my brain screamed and rebelled at the idea of anything happening to him.

I was lost in my thoughts as George and Bryan continued talking about the plan and the inside man, but still listened, gleaning as much information



as I could. I knew George wouldn't allow me to be a part of the plan, but I was going to be damned if I simply sat on the sidelines. I wanted to at least know what my love would be doing, so I could prepare to help in any way I could if things went wrong.

An hour later, we were headed up to bed, our last night together before the heist that would be risky at best. I loved him as if it was the last time I would ever have him in my bed. *It very well might be the last time*, a small voice spoke in my mind before I dismissed it.



The next morning, I awakened to an empty bed. I pulled on my robe and padded down the hall to find George laughing quietly with a much healthier looking Gregory. "Well, hello there boys," I smiled and gave Gregory a light kiss on the cheek.

"You're gonna spoil me with that," he greeted me, his speech much clearer than the night before. "I want to thank you for what you did for me last night. I might have bled to death without your help."

I clasped his hand and gave a gentle squeeze, gazing into George's smiling face. For just a while, the upcoming events of the day were forgotten and we existed only in the moment. I wanted to stop time, to freeze the world and extort the moment, but I knew that wasn't possible.

*Reality, you are a bitch.*

After talking with Gregory for awhile, listening to George outline the night's plan, then arguing with Gregory over his participation in said plan, we headed downstairs for coffee and breakfast. I stopped in to throw on some clothes and met the two oldest brothers in the kitchen, the smell of coffee enticing me.

“Thanks for the coffee, honey,” I smiled at George over my shoulder before reaching for a mug out of the cabinet.

“I didn’t make it,” he nodded in Bryan’s direction.

*I can’t believe it. He isn’t a complete jerk after all.* I thanked Bryan instead and sipped the delightful brew.

“What are we doing first?” Bryan immediately began, wasting no time.

“Well, first, we are going to have breakfast,” I interrupted, wanting to fake a sense of normalcy for as long as possible. I knew what was going to happen later, but wanted to hang on as long as possible to the happy morning before reality slapped me back into place.

“Agreed.” George smiled at me as he cracked eggs into a pan and pushed the toast down. We sat around the table like a family and enjoyed our meal, the men groaning after stuffing more food into their stomachs than should have been possible to digest. I fixed a small plate for Gregory and took it up to him.

“I brought you some breakfast,” I entered the room to find him sitting partially upright. His color was much better, a slight pink tint to lips that had been white and thin the night before, cheeks that had been sunk in and completely alabaster now a bit ruddy.

“Great. I’m starving.” He sat up with only a small grunt and took the proffered plate, immediately digging into the food without another word. I sat in the armchair next to the bed to keep him company and waited for him to finish his meal. His appetite was similar to his brothers’, and I worried I hadn’t fixed him enough to eat.

“How are you feeling?”

“Much better now that I’ve got a full stomach,” he laughed and rubbed his stomach. His face took on a much more serious look before he continued, “You know he loves you, right?”

I knew who he meant, and I professed my own love of his brother to him. “He makes me feel things that I’ve never imagined were possible, even in such a short time, which should scare me, but feels *just* right,” I admitted for the first time aloud. “I am worried about something going wrong tonight, though.”

“I am worried as well, and he won’t allow me to be there in any capacity,” Gregory sighed.

I wouldn’t tell him, but there was no way he would even be able to stand, much less be a part of a high-risk heist. I felt the need to immediately leave and go to George, to spend as much time with him as I could before they began their preparations, but I knew Gregory was just as worried and couldn’t leave the bed, so I stayed a bit longer, the minutes acting as grueling little spikes driven into my nerve endings. Finally, I left Gregory to a nap and went to find my lover and his taciturn brother.

I found them sitting at the table, a hand-drawn map spread between the two of them. As they pored over the plans and plotted, I sat down to listen. *He may not want me there, but damned if I won’t know what’s going on.*

“I think that will work, Brother,” Gregory smiled and rolled up the floor plans of the jewelry store.

I blew out a sigh of relief, knowing I would have a bit of time with him before the hour for them to leave was upon us. I was wrong.



Don showed up at my door, his pudgy frame blocking out the small bit of sunlight that managed to escape the overcast sky, which matched my mood. “I hope you have a plan of payment, because if I don’t have my money by midnight, I will come back here and show your lady the same courtesy I showed your brother.”

George had to be held back by Bryan as he lunged for Don's throat. "Do *not* threaten Goldie. Not if you value your worthless life," he growled.

While I knew he was standing up for me, I couldn't help but cringe. He had just given Don confirmation that hurting me would be the best way to get to George, and the drug lord's smile chilled me to the bone.

"We will have your money in plenty of time," Bryan pulled George further from the door, standing between his brother and Don. "We'll meet you in the usual place."

"Fine. But you know the consequences. Midnight, and not a minute after." Don finally left and George calmed enough to gather me in his bruising embrace.

I wished I had more time to show George how much I cared, but the hour of their departure was upon us, and I had to watch him leave with his brother no sooner than Don had vacated my driveway. "Please, please be careful," I begged, tears threatening to overflow.

George never said a word, only tenderly kissed me, before leaving through the side door and piling into the brother's vehicle. I watched as they pulled into the road, and I collapsed on the kitchen floor, sobs wracking my body. I felt an overwhelming sense of foreboding, and knew something was going to go terribly wrong. I couldn't shake the grief, and sought out my couch where I could scream into the pillow without disturbing Gregory.

In such a short time, I couldn't imagine losing George, or any of his brothers. I had taken them into my home, but he had taken me into his heart, and that was a far greater gift. Once my sobbing had subsided, I waited, the hours ticking by and welcoming me into my own private hell. Four hours later, the numbers on the clock began to blur as my eyelids tried to droop shut. I fought it for as long as I could before I succumbed to sleep's embrace.



*Goldie! Goldie help! Goldie, wake up!* My eyes snapped open, George's voice ringing in my memory. I knew something was wrong. The clock showed after midnight, and I wasted no time in jumping up and running up the stairs to grab a jacket and my shoes. I couldn't wait any longer.

I ran into Gregory's room first, the look on his face mirroring my own emotions. "Go. I know it too, just go," he pleaded with me.

I nodded and ran from the room, no time for words. I jumped in my car and headed towards the jewelry store where the heist was supposed to have gone down. A block away, was met with police and ambulance lights, the streets taped off with yellow crime scene ribbon. I felt my heart lodge in my throat as I pulled off of the road. I had to get inside the perimeter, had to see George. I needed to know what had happened, though a part of myself felt the loss already.

I stepped out onto the street and walked briskly down the block, trying to circumvent the group of police standing at the main street. I walked around the entire block, stopping to sneak through one of the fences belonging to a neighboring business. Once inside, I made my way through the parking lot and peeked around the building.

The ambulance was loading a gurney with a body bag into the back, and without thought, my feet carried me at full speed towards the vehicle. I heard screaming, and it took me a moment to realize that I was making the sound and sobbing as I skidded to a stop in front of the black bag.

"George! Oh God! Noooo!" I wailed and cried, the tears choking my words, my throat closing up in spite of the cries of rage and denial begging for release.

"Goldie," I heard my name croaked from behind me. "Goldie, I'm here. I'm okay." I swung my head around, intent on ripping out the throat of the

man daring to pretend to be George. Red colored my vision as it zeroed in on a bloody man strapped to another gurney.

I stalked over to the second ambulance, but as I got closer, the man's features came into view through my bloodshot and blurry vision. *Oh God! Thank you!* I ran the rest of the way and placed kisses on George's face, heedless of the blood and injuries, before being yanked back by police officers.

"Let me go, damn you! Let me hold him! Fuck off!" Words that rarely left my mouth tumbled out in a colorful array, but still the policeman continued to drag me away. "I love you, George! I love you!"

My mind did the obvious math and I realized that the man in the body bag must be Bryan. My heart ached for George's loss, but the relief I felt left a guilty hole in my heart. I had to find out what had happened. I had to know.

After hours at the police station in interrogation, I found out that someone had called in the attempted heist, and it had led to a gunfight. George was spared, lying somewhat safely in a hospital bed. Gregory had called me to tell me he had made it to the hospital after I had used my one phone call to contact him. I knew George was safe, and I no longer cared what the officers threatened me with if I failed to speak. I continued to give them different versions of the same answer, still in my colorful language.

Finally, the officers placed me in a cell. I sat and waited to be arraigned on charges of aiding and abetting, harboring fugitives, receipt of stolen property, collusion to commit a crime, amongst a handful of other charges. I didn't care. All that mattered was that George was alive, and someday, I would see him again. We would be together again. I lay down on my flimsy cot with my thoughts of reunion and waited for that day.



# **Curse of the Witch**



## Nicole Daffurn

It has been two years since that day—the day that was my downfall. I try to think about the events of that day as often as I can, the grudge that I harbour for Joringel growing, twisting, and turning into a fiery passion for vengeance within me.

Joringel destroyed my life with a blood red rose, which possessed a single perfect dew drop, and he is going to pay for the courage that burned like a flame within him—the courage that led him to his one true love, and by extension, to me.

My life had been perfect before he entered it. My abilities were surmounted by none. By day, I could choose to adorn myself with the gift of transformation. At my command, my body could shift into that of an owl or a feline. Disguising myself as either of these animals, I could lure my prey with ease and eat for a week. By night, I was the most beautiful witch to have ever graced the lands. Other people saw me as an old hag, but it was just part of my disguise.

Now, though, I have no choice. I am bound by the owl's body during daylight and my human form by night. That's not so bad, you say. It's not much different to what I had before, Wrong! Not having control over one's body is the worst curse you could wish upon a person. Imagine being trapped inside your own mind, unable to speak for the rest of your daylight hours. It is a horrible burden to bear, and one which I intend to break. Just as soon as I figure out how.

Not only did Joringel and his love bind me to my feathered counterpart while the sun is in the sky, they also took away my beloved nightingales. The ones I had spent years in waiting to collect.

Every person in this land knew of the consequences for the maidens who strayed too close to my castle at twilight, and yet they still came. Lured

here by the beauty of my gardens, they became trapped in the form of a nightingale by the powers of my song. They were my pride and joy, my pets, my companions—and they took them from me. You may think that I deserve to be bound to my owl shape, but I do not. The maidens that wandered in knew what would happen, they had warning. I did not.

Now, I have nothing. Loneliness is riddled throughout me, my life destroyed by the last nightingale, Jorinda, and her saviour. But never mind, they will pay dearly for their actions. No one curses the most powerful witch in all the land without paying the consequences.



It's twilight on my seven-hundred and thirtieth day trapped in the feathered body. I sit upon my regular branch overlooking the flower garden that has ensnared so many maidens over the years. I hear rustling below, and dive from my perch to take a closer look at the person who dared encroach upon my territory.

Two years ago, this never would have happened. Any man who dared to meander into my garden would have been paralysed by the curse I had placed upon the land. Now, though, they walk about freely as if they own the place. It is despicable to say the least.

The tall man's eyes meet with mine as he looks around at the sound of my screeching, and he appears as lonely as I feel.

"Hello there," he says gently, tilting his head to one side. "Are you hurt?"

His piercing blue eyes gaze at me in concern, like he expects an answer. I am about to start screeching again, when I feel the familiar burn within my body that means the transformation back to human is beginning. I stare into

the mysterious young man's eyes for a moment longer before shaking my head slightly and flying away to transform in peace.

I struggle to get back to the castle, the change back to human taking over and becoming uncontrollable. My heart pounds as I bank right, feeling the rush of air over my wings. Shadows move under me, food rustles through the grass and my stomach gives a lurch, reminding me that I haven't eaten today. That isn't important now; I just need to get...

I jerk my gaze up and scan the tower. There is a ledge not too far away, if only I can reach it. But the weight of my body holds me down. A call wrenches from my mouth, cleaving through the night. It is a call of both desire and defeat.

The ledge is nearing with each beat of my wings. The cold air rushes through the grey, downy plumes against my body as I surge forward faster. My claws are ready, extended wide, my nails ready to grip what I can. The surface slides under my grip. I pierce the wood as my body shudders. My nails slip, the claws no longer enough to hold me. Long fingers replace my pointed talons as I hold on for dear life.

The thin ledge is a cold comfort. I wrap my legs around the surface and shudder. Feathers turn back to flesh. My skin, not made for this cold, puckers. I push myself up and slide from the window. My bare feet hit the cold marble floor, soft pads echo in my wake as I move through my bedroom and head for the hallway.

The glow of the corridor is weak, but enough for me to step across the threshold until I stop. Bare... I am bare. I spin back and race for the bed. In the dark, my robe is a splash of blood against the white feathered quilt. I grab it, shiver and slide my arms through. I head back toward the hall, but decide upon returning to the open window I had so recently clambered

through. The pull within me to see the young man's face once more, taking over.

The arched window faces the east of the Kingdom below me and frames the amazing sight. *Picture perfect*, I think as I look below. I'm surprised that the man is still wandering among my roses. Usually, though the curse is broken, they still don't stay long. There are rumours about the Kingdom, of the castle being haunted. Which I, in fact, don't mind in the slightest. I don't like to be interrupted, so I encourage the whispers among the people.

This man though, he doesn't appear to be weary at all. Curious, I peer down at him from my tower, and notice that he is picking my flowers. Rage boils inside me. This is my garden, my flowers, my life. All that is left of my life. I sigh as the rage dissipates into longing and sadness, and place my elbows upon the window ledge to watch for awhile longer.

“My love, my love she went away,  
I tried though I could not make her stay.  
My love, my love took all of me,  
And in the dark stole my heart.  
My love, my love she went away,  
I tried though I could not make her stay.”

The young man's musical voice is astounding as he sings of lost loves, and I wonder then, what loving someone feels like. I had loved my nightingales before they were stolen away from me, but it was a different kind of love. I have never loved a human. I have never even liked humans. This human though, seems different.

He turned then, his gaze meeting mine peering down from the window. I draw in a sharp breath and turn to run. The tower, in which my bedroom resides, is littered with thousands of wicker-work baskets, and as I run, I

stagger into them in my haste. The first sets off a chain reaction of falling wicker baskets, and I fumbled to get through them.

The stairs that spiral down the side of the tower and lead into the main castle are steep, and I take them two at a time. I feel more like my owl self now, as I soar with my arms outstretched, my fingertips gliding along the banisters.

I come out in the large kitchen, the brickwork untouched since the day my mother had commissioned this castle built. I push the memories of my mother to the back of my mind. She was a cruel lady, crueller even than I am. I do not wish to remember her right now.

I find my escape in the rear garden, but I am not alone for long.

“Excuse me,” says the man. “I’m sorry if I scared you. It wasn’t my intent. Is this your castle?” he asks like he doesn’t know who I am.

“You very well know that it is, and if you had heeded the warnings from the Kingdom, you would know not to be here.” I say the words with as much malice as possible in an attempt to be rid of him.

“Warnings? I know of no warnings. I am new to the kingdom. I was passing through, and I saw your garden. I was unable to continue without stopping to smell your roses. They are remarkable.”

“I...” I don’t know what to say. I have never in my life been paid a compliment, and I’m not sure how to react.

“You...? Are you alright?” he asks tenderly, his hand outstretched as if to touch my arm. I move back two steps out of his way. No one is allowed to touch me.

“I’m fine,” I snap, unable to find any other words. I am infuriated at myself for allowing a mere human to render me speechless. I straighten out and glare, projecting my anger towards him.

“My name is Alexander Shiltz. It is a definite pleasure to make your acquaintance...?” his introduction ends with a question. He wants to know my name.

I search my mind for a minute before answering him. It has been such a long time since any person has uttered my name that I have almost forgotten it myself. “Abrielle,” I say quietly.

“Do you have a surname, Abrielle?” he asks, though I am shaking my head before he finishes his question.

“No. I was never gifted with one.” Alexander looks at me with curiosity in his eyes, but I know without a doubt that he will not ask the question he so desires.

“For you,” he says as he offers me the small bunch of roses he picked from my garden earlier. I take them without thanks and turn on my heel to enter my castle, and be left in peace.

I watch from the tower once more as Alexander makes his way through the dense forest that surrounds my home. He is gone. My rage flares once again as I remember his low voice, the stubble on his face, his wavy brunette hair. Everything about the man now infuriates me. How dare he render me speechless? How dare he ask my name? *My name!* He asked the greatest witch in history for her name, like I was some commoner. I am disgusted with myself for allowing it. Two years of solitude has made me soft.

“Damn you, Joringel! Damn you to Hell!” I scream at the top of my lungs out the arched window, and hear birds ruffling their feathers in the distance. “Tomorrow, when the sun goes down, I will hunt you, I will find you, and you will tell me how to break this curse, or you will die.” I finish quietly, my head still reeling from the outburst of anger.



Twilight, again. This time, though, I see no sign of Alexander ferreting around my garden. I dive down to the grassy land below me, and await the transformation. I am ready for it this time, and the burn that resonates through me matches the fiery anger that resides within me. I snatch my robe from a low hanging branch and fasten it around my waist. The shoes that have not adorned my feet for two years, now sit at the base of the tree, and as I pull them on, I squint at the unfamiliar feel of the boots.

My legs carry me through the forest faster than possible; the human fear of running into obstacles does not apply to me. I am one with the forest; it is part of my witch heritage. I close my eyes and allow my body to take over as I glide through the dense trees. The wind on my face is like a breath of fresh air, and I relish in the crunch of leaves underfoot.

Before long, I am in the marketplace. It is abuzz with life, night time vendors call out, trying to make a living from selling their stock and goods.

“You!” I say, pointing at the burly man at the first stall. “Where will I find Joringel?” I demand to know.

“I...I don’t know. Can I interest you in some chickens though, ma’am?” he asks, his eyebrows raised.

“Chickens? Chickens! No you *cannot* interest me in your damn chickens!” My hand is suddenly around his throat, and he is gasping for air. I release him, finger by finger, my nostrils flaring at the audacity of him.

“Fine!” I spit, “If you will not tell me, I will find someone who will.” The chicken vendor says nothing, but shrinks down under my gaze. He knows nothing.

Five stalls later, I have as much information as I entered with, and I am beginning to lose patience with the daft townsfolk. The next vendor is

selling bread of all sorts. The delicious smell fills my nose, and I wish I had time to stop and eat.

“Do you know Joringel?” I ask softly. My voice is lower now, but still holds the same amount of malice.

“Yes. He’s a frequent customer. Why? What do you want with the boy?” the baker asks wearily.

“It’s a personal matter. I’d appreciate if you point me in the right direction.” I’m nicer now. I finally have what I want, there is nothing stopping me at this point.

“He lives on the other side of town. Small brick house, flowers out front. It’s hard to miss.”

“Thank you,” I say as I leave the stall, a smile plastered to my face.



“Welcome, Abrielle. Please come in.” Jorinda is more than accommodating. I wonder if she would be still, if she knew who I really was.

“Thank you. I have walked a long way tonight, my body is weak.” Though I’m not weak at all, quite the opposite actually, I feel like I am buzzing with life. Joringel is not home, so there is only one thing to do while I wait.

“So, Jorinda,” I start, the young girl’s soft, pale face looks up to me, glowing with the light of the fire. “How long have you and Joringel known each other?”

“Forever. Our parents were acquainted long before Joringel and I were born.” Her voice is sickly sweet, and I want to empty the contents of my stomach all over the rug under our feet at the sound of it.

“That’s nice. Have you always known you loved him?”



She looks at me oddly but answers anyway. “No. Actually, until two years ago, I despised him.” She pauses for a moment, playing with her hair, and looking at me curiously. “How did you say you knew Joringel?”

“I didn’t. What made you change your mind about him?” This is it. This is the moment I have waited for.

“I was taken by a witch. She turned me into a nightingale, and trapped me within her castle. Joringel saved me. It was only then I realised my own affections for him.” Her eyes glaze over, lost in the depths of her precious memories, and I take my chance.

Leaping across the room, I pin the young woman beneath my body, her struggling limbs lashing out, but doing no damage under my weight.

“What are you doing?!” she screams at me and pushes against my arms, desperate for my weight to be off her.

“Saving you, of course,” I say innocently. “How on Earth would it look if your dear Joringel came in and saw us chatting like old friends? You, his love. And me, the witch he destroyed. No, we can’t have that at all. So I will save you here, until he comes home.” I finish with a broad, wicked grin and the girl begins to weep.

“You? But you’re...”

“Beautiful? Yes, I am. This is my true form. The old hag from your memories was just one of my many disguises,” I explain. She contorts her face into a look of rage, and a feeling of joy rises within me—but there is something else as well, something sad.

After a short struggle, I am finally able to get Jorinda into her chair by the fire, and tie her down using the ropes I had had the forethought to place in the pocket of my robes the night before. Now all there was left to do was wait.



I feel the hair on my neck stand on end with excitement as I hear footsteps on the porch. He is finally here. It is time to get back to the real me. A shiver runs down my spine at the thought, as I gather myself and stand beside Jorinda's bound form in the armchair.

I hear the faint rattle of keys. The door handle turns. My breathing becomes faster with every aching second that passes by. I will savour this moment for the rest of my life.

Joringel enters, and immediately draws a breath so deep I wonder where he is holding all of the oxygen he inhales.

"Jorinda!" he screams, and satisfaction creeps its way into my veins. "What is going on?" he demands of me.

"Hello, Joringel. Did your mother never teach you any manners? I do believe it is customary to greet your visitors before placing demands upon them," I say slyly as he moves forward, his hands clenched into fists. I tighten my hold on the rope that is wound twice around Jorinda's neck and wave a perfectly manicured finger in his direction.

"Uh, uh my dear boy. That is close enough."

"What do you want? Why do you have...wait, I know you. I saw your face two years ago. You're..."

"Yes. I am. Now, you will tell me how to break this damned curse you have me under, or I will kill your lady friend," I exclaim threateningly.

Far from divulging his secrets though, Joringel actually has the audacity to laugh at me. Me! The witch that is going to destroy him!

"You will never break the curse. Never!"

"Oh I will, and you are going to tell me how to do so." I once again tighten my grip on the noose, this time I hear a satisfying gasp come from

Jorinda's airways. I raise my eyebrows at the young face in the doorway, taunting him.

"I dreamed of you, nine nights before I brought you that rose up in your tower. The dream told me of a way to break your curses upon the maiden's trapped in your tower. This, I have told everyone. What I have told no one is the dream I had, of how to the curse that was placed upon you in return. But I see no point in keeping it from you now. You will never be able to break it anyway." A smirk creeps upon his face at his words.

"Then tell me how to do it!" I screech in his face, my anger towards the boy reaching its peak.

"You must learn to love. It is not enough to have someone love you. You must love them in return." I am in shock, my hand drops from the noose around Jorinda's neck, my mind fills with despair. He is right. I will never be able to break the curse. I am incapable of loving.

I make for the doorway, knowing that Joringel will not willingly let me pass after I have twice threatened the life of his beloved. I am prepared for the attack as I raise my arms to protect my body. I am too deflated to fight him, but I must survive. My only option now is to defend myself.

Joringel lunges forward, attacking me with his fists. I block his advances, but I am caught within his grasp before too long. He spins me around to face Jorinda, and whispers in my ear.

"This is for her. Remember it." A scream erupts from my mouth as he sticks a knife through my side. The searing pain is blinding, my eyes swell with tears of agony, and my screams still rent through the early morning air.

Through the open window behind the girl still bound to the chair, I see the sun begin to rise, and close my eyes in relief. Within seconds I am once again an owl. Joringel's hands flail through the air, desperately trying to grasp me, but I have slipped through his wanting fingers. I duck and weave

as I make my way back to the open front door, and disappear into the morning light.



“Abrielle,” I hear a soft voice calling my name, “Abrielle? Can you hear me?”

I open my eyes slowly, the pain from the knife wound still keening.

“There you are.” he says as I try to move into a sitting position. “No, don’t try to move. You’re wounded.” Alexander’s soft hands touch my side lightly, sending a stabbing pain through my body. I wince at his touch, and his face screws up in worry.

“Where am I?” I ask, my quiet pitch matching his.

“You’re in the tower. I found you in the woods, bleeding out over the foliage. I will send for a doctor. I just wanted to make sure you were alright first.”

“No. No doctors. Just leave me be,” I say weakly, my voice pleading with him not to call any medical professionals. I do not want the company of anyone. Not even him. I am doomed to a life of solitude—that much is certain now—and shape shifting, a life without control. I would rather let the pain settle in now than prolong it further.

“Alright, I won’t call the doctor. But I’m not leaving you here to die.” He is moving away now, his voice becoming more distant. I turn my head slightly to see where he is, and find him at the top of the stairs. “I’m going to get some warm cloths to clean you up. I’ll be back in a moment.”

I sigh, and turn to face the ceiling again. I do not want to be waited on; I just want to be left alone. I try to summon the strength to be angry with Alexander, but I cannot find it within me. There is something about the quiet man that calms something inside my mind.

As promised, he is back momentarily, a clean cloth in one hand, and a stone bowl of warm water in the other. He sits on my bedside gently, trying not to jostle me. I am thankful for that. He reaches over my body, the damp cloth in hand and gently lifts my robe to expose the knife wound in my right side. The cool air against my skin is relieving, but it doesn't last long.

Alexander presses the warm cloth to the cut, and I flinch and reach for his hand. My skin against his feels odd. I am no longer used to any kind of tender contact. Our gazing eyes meet at the touch, and I feel warmth spread throughout my body. It is an odd feeling, and one that I'm not sure I like.

I break the eye contact first, and let Alexander go about cleaning my wounds, and bandaging my torso tight. Tears spring to my eyes, the pain almost unbearable. I need rest, and yet, I don't want to close my eyes.

"You should sleep now. Rest will help you heal."

"I don't want to sleep. I want to do something, anything to take me mind off the pain." I feel awkward having a normal conversation. I don't remember ever having what human's class as a normal conversation, not at any stage in my life. Not with anyone. With me, it has always been threats and yelling. I was born a witch, and with that, came responsibilities and a specifically designed way of life. I respected that way of life, and had lived it to my full extent—until Joringel.

"Alright, how about we talk then. Tell me something interesting about yourself."

*Not yet*, I think. "How about you tell me something, I'm still a little weak." I say, trying to shift the attention from myself.

"Alright then, I was born not too far from here. The neighbouring Kingdom, in fact, but I have left there now. I have no intention of returning."

"Oh?" I ask with genuine curiosity.

“My parents want me to be something that I’m not.” He shrugs as if it doesn’t matter to him, but I can tell from the sad look in his eyes that it does.

“What do they want you to be?”

“A prince. I am betrothed to a woman I do not love.”

The statement stirred a memory within me, and I asked my question without a thought. “Is that the girl you were singing about in the garden?”

He lets out a small laugh at my question, but his eyes still hold sadness within them. “No, that’s just a song. My father used to sing it to me as a child. I hadn’t realised you heard me.”

I don’t know what to say to his answer. Something flutters within me, I feel happy and sad all at the same time. Could it be relief? “Oh,” is the only response I can conjure out of myself.

“So what about you?”

“Oh, you don’t want to hear about me. It’s not nearly as nice as your story.”

He gives me an odd look at that. “Nice? You think my story is nice? Your own story must be very sad if you think that mine is nice.”

I decide without much thought to tell him what I am. I don’t know why, it will not benefit me, but at least I may be left alone to wallow in my self-pity if I tell him. I close my eyes briefly before I start.

“I am a witch, and not a nice one. I used to trap maidens who wandered too close to my castle at twilight. I would transform them into nightingales and keep them locked within cages.” I look around the room then, pointing out the wicker-work cages with my eyes.

“Oh. Well that’s not so bad. Nightingales are beautiful after all,” he says it with a smile on his face, and I can’t figure out whether he means it or if he is being condescending. “What do you mean *used* to?”

“A curse was placed upon me two years ago. I am doomed to be bound in the form of an owl by daylight, and a human by night. I am still one with Earth, as are my witch sisters and warlock brothers. But I can no longer practice even the most basic magic,” I end quietly, sadly.

“Can you break the curse?”

I shake my head, not wanting to talk in case I start sobbing.

“It will all be okay. I will find a way to help you.”

I don’t understand Alexander. Why isn’t he running in the opposite direction screaming? Why does he want to help me? I am a witch. I have done bad things, and yet he still wants to help me return to that. Why? I fall asleep under his watchful gaze and dream of nightingales, cages, and men with a touch so soft it is agonizing.

I wake in my owl form, Alexander still be my side. He is stroking my wing as he changes the now too-large bandages for smaller ones.

“Good morning,” he says.

I hoot in response.

“I made you some breakfast.” He beams down at me, and lifts a plate from the side table. The plate contains eggs and bacon. He lifts the fork to my beak and feeds me bite after bite, not saving any for himself. When I am finished, he places a gentle kiss on my forehead, and strokes my wing. The affection is new to me, and somewhere in the back of my mind, I am being told to enjoy it.



Two weeks have passed since I was stabbed, and Alexander, or Alex as I have come to know him, has not left my side once. Currently, it is almost twilight, and I am learning how to fly once again. The pain has subsided to a manageable level now, and I am able to get out and about more frequently.

I glide to the grass below me and await the change. As he does every night, Alexander turns his back while I dress, and waits for me to approach him before turning back to me.

“Was it easier tonight?” he asks worryingly. Always worrying.

“Yes, much,” I lie.

“Don’t lie to me, Abrielle. You know you are horrible at it.”

It’s the truth. I have never been a liar, and I don’t do a good job of convincing anyone of anything except for the truth. “I’m sorry. No, it was still painful.”

He nods at me, accepting the answer. “Take a walk with me?” he asks, extending his hand to me.

I take it, and we walk in the low moonlight through the rose gardens that surround my home. He bends, picks one of the blooming yellow roses, and offers it to me. Unlike the last time he offered me my own flowers, this time, I do not feel rage. Something within me has changed in the last two weeks. Something warm and gentle has surfaced. Something I never thought I could feel. Fondness. But fondness is not love, and it will not break the curse.

“Will you tell me now?”

“Tell you what?”

“How to break the curse.”

I sigh, he asks me this same question every day. And every day I refuse. Today is no different.

“Not yet,” I say quietly.

He hugs me closer and whispers in my ear, “Someday soon, you will trust me enough.”

“It is not a matter of trust, Alex. It is just something that I must do myself.” He has been told this every day as well, and yet he still tries.



I hear rustling coming from beyond the far wall behind us. Maybe a rabbit. I turn, wanting to see if I can catch something of worth and cook Alexander a pleasant meal. He has cooked every meal since the day I was stabbed, and I feel that I'd like to return the favour. No matter how small it is.

It is not a rabbit that rustles the long grass at the edge of the wall. It is a human. A human with a sword pointed in my direction. My breath hitches in my throat at the sight, and I am powerless to do anything but stare at the man who has just thrown his sword with the might of ten men.

"Joringel! No!" I scream, I can see the sword, as if in slow motion, headed towards me, but I am not fast enough to move out of its path. I see a flash at my side—Alexander. He dives in front of my body, protecting me, and taking the metal blade in his chest.

"No!" I wail.

Joringel looks on in horror at what he has done, and before I can gather my senses, he has gone. I fall to the ground beside Alex, tears falling in grief for the first time in my life.

"Alex. You're going to be alright. I'm going to take care of you," I say quietly, my tears dropping onto his chest.

"Never mind, my love. I am not worth saving. Save yourself." He doesn't realise that there is no one to save myself from now. He didn't see Joringel run.

"I am saved," I say, as I realise what this grief symbolises. "You *have* saved me." His breathing is laboured, his eyes finding it hard to focus.

"How?"

"Because I love you," I say as I bend to place a kiss upon his lips. I feel a burden lift from me, as if the weight of a thousand years has been lifted from my shoulders. I watch as Alexander closes his eyes, and I weep.



It has been five years since that day. The day that changed my life. I think about it as often as I can, my love for the man who took a sword for me, growing, and swelling within my heart every time my mind crosses the memory.

I am in the rose garden. It is more beautiful now than it has ever been. I see a man strolling toward me cautiously. Word had spread through the kingdom of my curse being lifted. Any who came close, turned away rapidly. I have not placed a curse upon a single soul in seven years, and they still fear me, but not this man.

“Abrielle. Have I told you today how much I love you?” he asks tenderly.

“Only about ten times my love.”

“Why stop there then?” he asks, as he picks me up and twirls me around. I lift my head towards the sky above. It is daylight, I am human, and I am in love. I am happy.



# **Lorelei: The Nightingale**

## Catherine Stovall

John Emperor's seaside home was damn near a palace. Everything within was costly and fragile, right down to the platinum records hanging on satin covered walls. His favorite place was his garden full of exotic and native flowers, which bloomed next to each other in glorious twisting arrays. The opulence and precision that had gone into creating the paths, beds, gazebos, and fountains had been his solace. These things were the only family he had, and as his fame grew, he threw great parties to show off his success and the beauty of his gardens.

Beyond John's property, a forest of tall evergreen trees stretched down the rocky cliffs, straight to the white sand beaches, raging waves, and the seaside bars with their neon lights. Large ships sailed right up to the port, and bobbed on the waters, bathed in the glow of a pink and blue sign that read: The Nightingale.

At the same time John stood in his garden, lonely and sad, a fisherman upon one of the large ships paused in his work at the sound of the loveliest voice he'd ever heard. Lulled into a blissful place by her song, he stared out across the shimmering, moonlit waters as the waves gently rocked the vessel.

"How beautiful the lady sings!" he breathed as the music ended and he returned to his work.

People came from all over the world to dine at John's table, to discuss record deals and stardom, and to walk in the beautiful gardens as they dreamed of fame. Yet, when they left the kingdom on the hill above the sea, they would slip down to the seaside bars to celebrate among themselves, leaving him alone in his palace of marble and solitude.

If these people happened to hear the woman at the Nightingale sing, they all exclaimed, "She's the best I've ever heard!"

All the best magazines talked of John and his home, the small seaside town where he lived, and the beauty of it all. The articles often spoke of the magnificence of his gardens and the other attractions in the area. Almost all of them mentioned the Nightingale, and the woman who could bring a man to tears with her sweet ballads.

One day, too tired to walk in his gardens or return to the endless stack of work on his desk, John turned to the stack of magazines that came like clockwork to his home. His face peered back from several of the covers, headlines dubbing him ‘the Emperor of Record Labels’ and boasting of his success. He opened the first of the publications and scanned the article there. To his surprise, all the good words ended with a strange comment.

“The most astonishing thing about our visit to John Emperor’s little seaside kingdom was a trip to the seaside bars, where talent runs thick. On many of the late night stages, one can partake in a variety of talents and skills. One such place is a club called The Nightingale, where a waitress, known only as Lorelei, sings somber and soulful tunes. Personally, we were shocked that Mr. Emperor has not discovered this gem for himself.”

“What the hell?” John dropped the glossy pages onto the desk. “The Nightingale? Where the hell is that? What kind of nonsense name is Lorelei? She can’t be that good. It’s not possible for a star to be singing in a night club right at my front door.”

Swiping up the phone, he called his local agent, Chambers. “Supposedly, there is an extraordinary singer performing at a club called The Nightingale. I’m reading an article in *Song!* that says she’s the best thing since Whitney Houston. Why haven’t we signed her yet? Why has no one told me about her before?”

“I’m sorry, boss. I’ve never heard of such a girl. She’s never sent in a demo or came to the open mic nights at Rockards,” Chamber’s voice shook.

“I want her to come here, tonight, and sing for me,” John demanded. “The whole world knows about her now, and it won’t be long before someone else snags her up from right under our noses.” The impatience in his voice was clear.

“The Nightingale? Never heard of it.” Chambers quickly added, “I will search for her. I will find her, sir.”

“You’d better, Chambers. You’ve never let me down before. But if you let this girl get away, I will fire you and your entire staff. I won’t be made a fool of.”

The line went dead, leaving Chambers staring at it blankly for a full minute before he turned to his keyboard. A quick internet search didn’t bring up any clubs on the coast with the name. He flipped through his black book, and called all his trusted contacts. No one had ever heard of the club or the woman, Lorelei.

Exasperated, he cradled his head in his hands and sighed. “Impossible, John. This Emperor crap has gone to your head. This is madness,” he cursed his boss under his breath.

A knock on his door shook him back out of his thoughts. “Mr. Chambers, can I empty your trash, or should I just come back later?”

With a dismissive wave of his hand, Chambers admitted the young housekeeper to his office, and continued to search his rolodex for anyone who might know of the bar. He couldn’t think, the maid was humming and the tune was off. He raised his head to yell at her, when he noticed the earbuds in her ears, and the way she bounced across the room with the trash bin.

*Of course, he thought. The young always know where the hottest spots are.*

“Young woman!” he shouted. “Young woman!”

The second time he screamed at her, she turned and pulled the earbuds out with an apologetic grin. “Yes, Mr. Chambers.”

“Have you heard of the Nightingale or a local singer named Lorelei?”

“Oh, yes! The Nightingale is the best place to go. I know it well. Lorelei, she sings there every night! She has the most beautiful voice. My friends and I go down to the shore, and I love to go listen to her sing. We all do. Her voice is unexplainable, all deep and husky. It’s like whiskey, smoke, and something that makes you want to cry.”

“Take me there,” he demanded. Then with a softer tone he added, “I will arrange it so that you get a raise, or a better position. I can even arrange for you to meet Mr. Emperor. He insists on meeting this girl, tonight.”

With a quick eagerness, the maid agreed, “Yes, sir. I’d be happy to show you.”

“Excellent,” Chambers cried. “Let me call my consultants, and we will set out.”



A half an hour later, the small entourage parked the car and began making their way down the boardwalk. From the entrance of a jazz club, they could hear a crooner’s voice, and Squire, the company busy body said, “We’ve found her! Do you hear that? What a voice!”

“No,” the maid shook her head. “That is Sammy J. Not Lorelei. We are still a ways from the right place.”

They walked farther, the crowds of people pushing to and fro and the exotic smell of seafood wafting in the air. From the open door of a country bar, a strong voice belted out a solemn ballad.

“Lovely,” proclaimed Chaplain, yet another assistant. “Her voice is so classic, so pure.”



Again, the maid shook her head. “No. That’s Alyssa, not Lorelei. We have a bit further to go.”

They continued on, not even bothering to pause and watch the jugglers, dancers, and other street performers that paraded about.

When they’d almost given up hope, and had begun to whisper that the maid had taken them on a wild goose chase, they heard Lorelei’s voice. Strong and mournful, it called out to the soul and the heart. The sweetness of the tone suggested youth, but the spirit sounded as old as one of the many greats.

“There, do you hear her?” the maid exclaimed as they turned toward a small club with blue and pink neon lights. “Listen!” she insisted as she pointed toward the stage. “That’s Lorelei.”

“That can’t be her,” Chambers stuttered. “I don’t think she is quite what Mr. Emperor had in mind. She looks like a street urchin in those rags. She must be homeless, just look at the holes in her jeans and that ugly sweater. The hat, that terrible sock cap!”

Just then, the song ended, and Lorelei exited the stage.

The maid called out, “Lorelei! Lorelei!”

The young woman turned her dull brown eyes across the room, and smiled. “Joy! How are you?” Then with hesitation, “And who are these gentlemen with you?”

“This is Mr. Chambers, Mr. Squires, and Mr. Chaplain. They’ve come to ask you to sing for Mr. John Emperor. Tonight!”

“I’ve just finished my set,” Lorelei responded. “I can ask the manager, or I can sing a few bars here.” Her nervousness was apparent as she began to sing.

Chambers clapped his hands together when she finished. “Splendid! Really, you have such talent! Your voice is so unique. You sing with such

fierceness for such a little thing. You are going to be a giant success, young lady! I can't believe no one has signed you yet."

"I've never sang anywhere else but here. I am not sure I will do well, but okay." The excitement of meeting the man who had made stars out of so many carried her away.



John had gone out to the garden and cut his most lavish blooms, setting them in priceless vases around the house. Music played softly through the hidden speakers throughout the rooms, all songs from artists he'd built to stardom. The ambiance was one of absolute richness and triumph.

In the middle of the main sitting area, John lounged on a large, gray suede chair next to a piano. Several other executives had been called in, as well as a stylist, all in preparation of seeing his next big star. Even the little maid, Joy, had been allowed to stay, since she knew Lorelei—who sat at the piano. Still dressed in her ripped jeans and sock cap, her fingers shook above the ivory keys,

John nodded to her, and she began to play and sing.

The song made tears fill his eyes and roll down his cheeks as the first soft notes wound their way into his heart. Just when he thought there couldn't be any more beauty to be heard, Lorelei's voice rose into high, pure notes that filled the empty house.

John was so excited, he leapt from his seat when the song was over and tried to drape his own gold chain around the girl's slender neck. "This will be just the beginning, my girl. When we are done, you will have all the best of all the best."

"I am just honored to have been offered such an opportunity to sing for you, Mr. Emperor. Thank you, but I really can't accept that."

“Nonsense,” John declared as he fastened the chain around her neck. “Sing! Sing for us again. You are our own little nightingale.”



Days, weeks, and months passed quickly, and Lorelei was made to sing in front of many people. Before she knew it, she found herself in a recording studio. Even the guys who ran the soundboards found her voice astounding, which was astonishing, considering that they thought themselves better judges of music than the agents and owners. Once the demo was done, everywhere it played, it was well received. Lorelei became the Nightingale and was an instant success. Her greatness became so much, even John fell in love with her, and a true passion bloomed between the two.

She was given her very own rooms in John’s house, because she’d previously lived on the wharves, staying wherever she could. She had free reign to wander the gardens, and she did so twice a day and often at night. Often finding a certain peace among nature after the toils of her days as a star, she still felt trapped. Everywhere she went, bodyguards followed—protection against her adoring fans.

The whole world talked about the extraordinary young girl who had been discovered homeless, waitressing, and singing in a bar on the docks. People named their children Lorelei, her name was on the lips of every lover of music, and her songs were number one on the charts. Her future seemed solidly set in gold and platinum.



On a cloudy afternoon, John sat in his office at the very top of a brand new building that had been constructed with the profits from Lorelei’s

success. His eyes rose at the knock on the door, and he was surprised to see the man and woman who entered.

“I have someone here to meet you,” Malone, a small time club manager, leered. “This is Adele.”

The girl was beautiful, small with dark hair and dark eyes just like Lorelei, but with large fake breasts, dyed pink highlights, and decked out in diamonds, rubies, and sapphires. Her body had been sucked, sculpted, nipped, and tucked into a sex symbol version of his little song bird.

With a bored motion of his hand, though his eyes traced the gilded curves of the woman before him, John signaled that the girl should sing. Her painted lips parted, and she belted out one of Lorelei’s most famous songs as she writhed and twisted in a sensual dance.

Leering still, Malone announced, “Emperor, your little singer is paltry compared to mine.”

“She’s lovely,” John agreed, and the contracts were immediately drawn up—Malone earning himself a job as an agent for Emperor Records as well.

“Let’s have them sing together,” Malone suggested. “A real duet. It will be an instant success.”

They called Lorelei to the studio at once, but the duet was not a success. Lorelei’s voice was soulful and full of the pain and trial that she’d suffered for so many years. Adele’s was professionally trained and full of her purchased self confidence.

As they worked, Adele was asked to sing again and again. The vocal coaches applauded, saying how splendid was her technique, and how they’d never be able to train Lorelei, at her age, as well as Adele had been sculpted. As well as her talent, the usurper glittered and shimmied until they all fell in love with her charming appearance.



Soon, all of the music executives, stylist, and lackeys turned their attention to the shiny new artist. Adele's music was much more in style. Her sex kitten appeal and pop attitude drew the people to her. Lorelei, who refused to let the stylist change her appearance, seemed faded and drab compared to the new girl. A whole new marketing plan was built upon the gorgeous woman's future career, and John worked side by side with her late into the night for many weeks.

One night, he returned home very late, guilt over forgetting Lorelei weighing heavily on his heart. To his surprise, she was gone. He searched the house and the gardens, which suddenly seemed to lose their luster without her walking there, but she was nowhere to be found. No matter how hard he looked, he couldn't seem to discover where his little nightingale had flown.

In a board meeting the next day, he declared, "What the hell is she thinking? She's got to be the most ungrateful woman ever."

His employees all agreed and offered up their best condolences. "It doesn't matter. Adele is much better, and we have her."

Chambers stood up, commanding the attention of the room. "Adele is beautiful, she appeals to the masses. She is trained and well-bred. She has been brought up with a music career in mind. We could never count on what Lorelei would or could do, but with Adele, she hasn't got a single original thought in her head. She will do whatever we need done and do it with the trained precision that is expected of a star."

John sneered, anger fueling his words, "My thoughts exactly."



A huge concert was scheduled and a single set to release, so Adele could be introduced to the people. The show, and the subsequent appearances in magazines and on television, was a huge success. Adele became even more famous than Lorelei had ever been.

People loved the complicated and electronic sound of her music, they adored the auto-tuned voice, and they admired her beauty above all. However, those that had heard Lorelei sing at The Nightingale, shook their heads in confusion.

“Adele sings well enough, and she is very sexy, but she doesn’t have what Lorelei has. She is missing the passion and the heart.”

However, no one would hear Lorelei sing anymore. Not unless they drifted back down to the wharves and sat at a little table in the smoke filled bar. Emperor Records had severed her contracts, and she’d returned to the life she loved as a waitress, a vagabond, and a sometimes midnight crooner.

Adele kept a place in the silk sheets on John’s bed. He lavished her with gold jewelry garnished with precious stones, and an endless array of trinkets lined the dressers and closets of the house. He called her his little songbird, and the entire music world loved her. She was the heart of Emperor Records, and John fell deeply in love with her.

The entertainment magazines wrote no less than twenty-five articles on her talent and beauty, detailing everything about her that they could learn. Even those who did not love her pretended to, because Adele was the in-girl. No one wanted to be considered uncool or out of the loop, so they all played her songs on an endless loop.

A year passed in this way, and the whole world knew every word of every song she sang. They could all hum every bar, because the composition was so simple and without challenge. The catchy tune and easy

lyrics made them comfortable, and they liked that above all else. Even John would catch himself singing the words as he worked away the days.



Just when it seemed all was well, and Lorelei was forgotten, fate struck as it often does. Adele was preparing for bed, her voice slurring as she sipped from her wine glass and sang. John lay in bed listening to the rattle of pill bottles and her increasingly unstable tune. When he heard a crash and a loud thump, the song stopped.

John sprang from the bed and dialed his personal physician at once, the one who served all the stars and always knew how to keep a secret. Next, he phoned his psychiatrist, because he knew the doctor could only fix the body, but the problem was truly in the young girl's mind. Fame and stardom had taken a great toll.

They spoke for hours at her bedside as she lay in unconscious bliss. She'd sing again, she'd be able to perform, but the appearance would have to be scheduled sparingly because something in her mind was worn out. A terrible shame, but Adele would need to record less and rest more, and not be upset in the least for a long while. She only went on tour once a year, and her behavior then was erratic at best. Fewer and fewer albums were made, but the magazines and the press said she was doing well, so she was doing well.



Five years passed, and again, fate raised its hand. The music world fell into sadness at the announcement that John Emperor had fallen ill and might die. His second in command was prepared to step up and take the

company, but the paparazzi and regular media stood outside John's home, trampling his gardens and constantly asking if he still lived.

"No comment," Chambers growled every time.

Pale and waning, John lay in his magnificent bed alone. His entourage, even his beloved Adele, had abandoned him in his last hours. Unable to look at the once vigorous man as he faded away, they treated him as if he were already dead and gone. The flowers filled the room, and everyone who did come, wore black. The house was kept silent, the once constant music gone. His only solace was the smell of the gardens through the open window above the bed and the moon shining in.

His breathing became ragged and the pressure felt as if something was squeezing his chest. The fever burned his brain, and when he opened his eyes, he saw Death sitting upon his chest. The creature spun a gold record in one hand and held one of John's many awards in the other. All around the thing, the shadows of John's misdeeds and triumphs swayed and swirled together. Their faces were twisted masks of pain and blissful smiles of adoration.

Death laid its hand on John's heart.

"Do you remember me? Do you remember this?" his evil and good doings whispered. They showed him and told him of all the rights and wrongs he'd committed in his life. All of which left him panting and weeping in fear.

"I didn't know," he cried out, trying to fight off the voices of all those he had once known. Screaming to anyone who might hear, he shouted, "Music! Play the music. Drown out the sound of Death and his creatures."

The voices tormented and pressed, insistent that he should know all of what he had done. Their words and images blurred together in a matinee of madness and sorrow, jubilation and success. He had done many things in



his life, and as he pleaded for release, Death watched on— nodding his head as if to say that he understood.

Finally, Adele came to stand at the side of his bed with a wine glass in her hand and tears in her eyes.

“Sing! Sing, damn you. Sing away the damned! I gave you everything; I gave you riches and fame. I gave you my heart. So sing now, sing!” he begged.

She remained silent, her mind empty from the medications and the wine. Her heart deader than his own, could not allow her to sing. So Death kept on, its horribly dark eyes staring into John’s soul, and the silence prevailed. The world was quiet, so quiet, and Adele walked away.



Just when he had given up hope, a voice came through the window, the loveliest song he had ever heard. Lorelei, his nightingale, sat outside in his gardens and sang just for him. She had heard of his illness and had come to offer solace and hope.

On and on she sang, and as she did, the voices and shadows faded. John’s heart grew stronger, and his blood flowed faster through his weak limbs. Even Death stopped his infernal staring and nodding to listen.

In a voice as cold as grave dirt, Death whispered, “Keep singing, little nightingale. Keep singing.”

“If you give back his records, give back his awards, and give back his heart, I shall sing,” she whispered right back.

Death returned all the things, and Lorelei kept singing. She sang of a dustland fairytale, of memories, and of everlasting love. She let her sorrow fill her voice as she sang of dying roses, goodbye kisses, tears that fall, and of going to the grave.

The lyrics and the mournful tone made Death long for his own cold gardens with the tombstone statues and mourning saints. With icy tears streaming down his sallow cheeks, he floated out of the window in a chilly white mist and vanished.

As Death left the room, Lorelei entered.

“Thank you, thank you!” John cried. “You lovely, wonderful woman! I abandoned you, I left you, and still you have come to sing away the visions of evil and Death from my bed and my heart. How can I ever repay you?”

“Your attentions so long ago were payment enough,” Lorelei sighed. “You gave me faith in myself and a love for my voice that I had never had before. You made me see that I am good enough to be a star, if that was what I wanted. To be loved for the talent one possesses is the greatest treasure of all. Sleep now, dear one. I will sing for you once more.”

John fell into sleep with her small hand on his cheek and her sweet voice driving away the silence. When he awakened, the sun was shining, and he felt strong and healthy once more. No one had returned to his side, still believing him to be nearly dead, but Lorelei remained, still singing.

“Stay with me, my nightingale. Not as my star, or my lover, but as my wife. Let me love you and make up to you all that I have done. I will leave Adele. I will send her to another company. I will end her contracts. Please, be mine forever,” he pleaded.

“Don’t do that!” Lorelei exclaimed. “She has done the best she could, and she loves you. Keep her as best you can, and love her with all of your heart. She is such a fragile thing. I can’t stay here with you. I have my own life to live now. I bought The Nightingale, and I still sing there every evening, but I will come to visit. I will do whatever I can to make you and Adele happy and keep her from suffering. It was never her choice to harm me.”

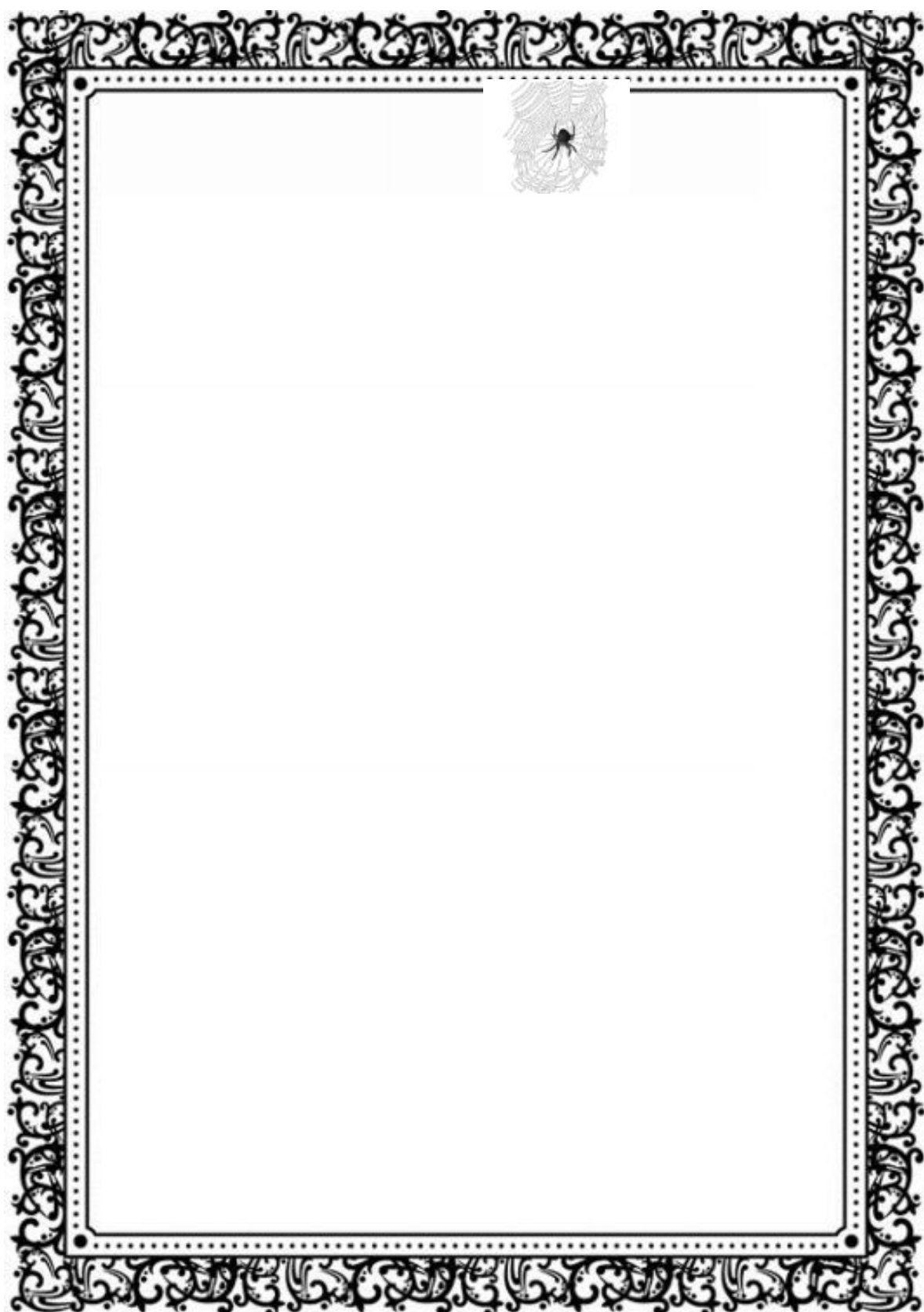
John shook his head, unable to believe that she'd choose to live a life on the wharves than with him in his decadent home.

"I sing to make people happy, and from that tiny stage, I reach people's hearts. I sing to the poor, the rich, to everyone who chooses to listen. I love your heart far more than your money, and yet I choose to refuse both. I will forever be your friend, John Emperor, but you must promise me one thing."

"Anything!" he cried.

"Tell no one my name. I shall be your best kept secret. I want no one seeking out the star I was, because that is not who the woman I have become."

Lorelei walked out the door, and John stood in good health, reaching for his phone. He would rule once more as the music mogul that he had always been, but forever after, he would have a nightingale of his very own, one in which he would never share.



# Wayward Place

Pyxi Rose

Drips far east, I am that cotton candy dream...  
Tangles and webs of your curls, I am the water under your  
bridges...

Think of me when you break just a little.  
Think of me when no one is looking...when the world is  
empty and the moon is watching...

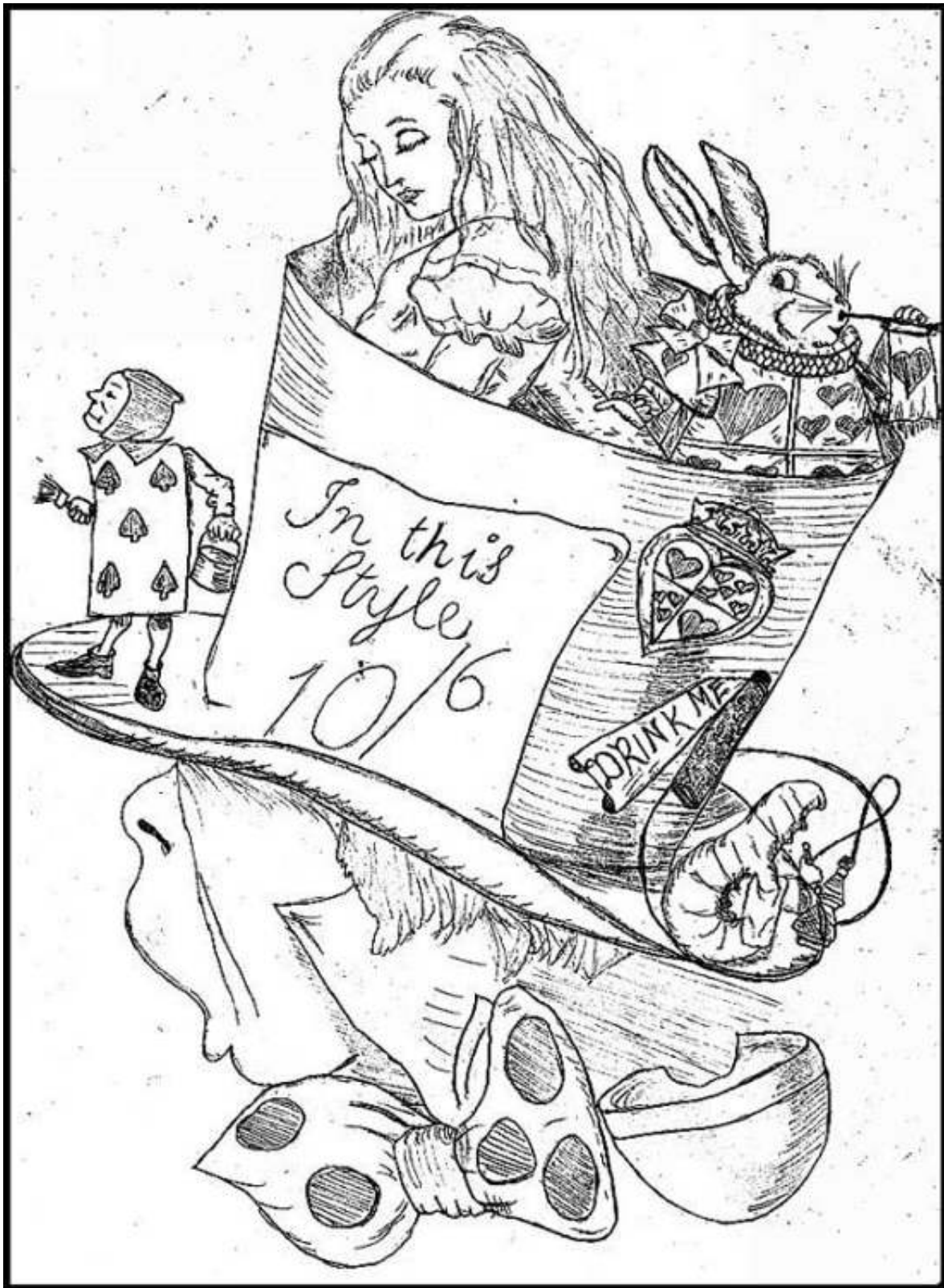
In that realm, I am just merely your ghost.  
Merely fingerprints in the dust...  
I am blowing, slipping, tripping down a downward spiral,  
wayward place.

But aren't we all?  
I brush away that scent that so claims your essence...  
Those lingering pieces, oh yes I breathe you in like air.  
Tangles and webs of your curls, I lose myself as my fingers  
blanket your body.

Here in this state, all states fade into one.  
Us.  
Pushing and pulling, roughness and calm, I take you into  
my dwelling.

In my glass needle garden, oh my sea will amaze you.  
Think of me when no one's asking, when everyone is  
wanting, and the rain is falling...  
Think of me when you realize you could be falling, too.  
Call on me when your skies fail you...  
For I am the water under your bridges.  
In that realm, I am just merely your ghost.  
Thunder rolling skies, yes your thought is always there.  
Think of us when it rains...when the moon is setting and the  
new day beginning...  
Think of us...





**Out of the Hat and into Wonderland**

**Nicole Daffurn**



Raise  
Lexi Ostrow



# **Raise**

**Lexi Ostrow**

# Chapter One

Her amber eyes narrowed into slits and she watched as her sisters foolishly fought over something as frivolous as a gown color. Pink, blue, pink and blue—back and forth the zaps and spurts of magic went.

Anger fizzled just beneath her skin as she watched the golden-haired princess Aurora twirl circles with her love. They spun delicately across the floor as if gliding across a frozen lake. Their expressions sickened her. Eyes locked together, love and lust smoldered between Prince Philip and Princess Aurora. It was in their every glance. The dilated pupils, the unblinking gaze into each other eyes, and the way they didn't notice anyone else was in the room, told the story of a connection stronger than any magic could ever conjure up. Stronger than any fairy godmother.

Her right hand clenched into a tight fist, her neatly manicured nails digging into her flesh, while her left fingers encircled her wand so tightly that sparks of yellow—the color of her magic—shot from its tip. She shook her head as the frustration continued to build in her and she could feel her short cobalt black hair, tickling the nape of her neck as she did. Sela watched on, her breath hitching as the anger wrapped tighter and tighter in her stomach, coiling like a spring ready to pop. Her eyes were riveted to the distasteful scene before her.

She swore as her sister's voices and mundane conversation mocked her. They were across the way, hiding in the ceiling crawl panels, but Sela had found a spell when she was younger that amplified her hearing. She'd needed to in order to learn anything that had gone on around her. Her sisters had rarely spoken to her directly in their youth.

There was no point in gazing up the ornate column walls and looking at her sisters once more. It was enough that she was torturing herself watching the dance of the lovers. Watching her sisters, bickering but still friendly, would be the nail in the coffin that set her off. She'd bet anything that Flora, Fauna and Merryweather would have shit themselves if they knew baby sister had come out to play.

Sela was just that, the youngest sister of the famous trio of fairy godmothers, and she had been spurned by her older sisters each and every time she'd spoken to them growing up.

"No Sela, you're too young to cast that hard of a spell."

"Sela, you'll only get hurt if you try to fly so young."

Her mother had died giving birth to her, and their father had flown off shortly after, claiming to seek out a powerful magic that could bring her back. He'd never returned, and her sisters had not become the matronly figures they grew to be while caring for little baby Aurora. So she'd grown up in the shadows, and when Princess Aurora had been born she'd been left out of the gifting, and during her deep slumber and awakening, Sela been left out of that battle too.

*Left out.*

The whole of her existence could be boiled down to two very tiny words. Her magic was weaker due to never having her sisters to practice with. Her love of humanity was weaker because she'd never met any. In fact, every emotion was stifled, cut off before it had time to form, except for jealousy and hatred. Jealousy wrapped its grubby fingers around her each and every day. Always whispering, always telling her to force people to pay attention to her, and to force them to let her belong. However, it had never worked, and she was always staring from the sidelines, watching and wanting.

A distinct sizzle sounded in her ear, and she jerked her gaze down to her yellow-slipped feet. Mere inches from her, the luxurious golden wood smoked, the tendril curled up to her leg and wrapped around her, almost stroking her. The burn hole was small, but proof enough she had pushed herself too far. Outings in public tended to end the same way, her anger and jealousy simmering to a boil and blowing. The damage to the floor in the crawl space was small, doubtful it would ever be noticed even. But it was there, and it was a sign she had lost control—again. Control she didn't really have to begin with.

“Can't you do anything proper, Sela?” she snorted as she flew down from the crawl space and landed in a fairly deserted corner of the ballroom. “Of course you can't.”

Her wand sparked again as she clutched it. Closing her eyes, she did her best to block out the laughter, the boisterous music, and the wonderful smells from pastries and pheasant that wafted up her nostrils as she'd let herself reach the ground.

Sela's lips pursed as she forced a small puff of air from her lips, attempting to calm herself down. It felt like she had stood in the corner for far longer than the few moments, but composure was hers once more. A stony mask of indifference had settled over her mental faculties. Her smile—as fake as her relationship with her sisters—was plastered on, so that she wouldn't startle the crowd with her cold visage. She'd grown used to practicing it. When she realized her sisters were never going to include her, well, indifference seemed to be one more emotion she'd felt after all.

“My lady?” The sound flowed over her and sent a shudder through her.

Someone had spoken to her and not noticed her wings. She forced them to lay flat against her back, hoping that he would not draw back in alarm that a magic user the kingdom did not know about was present. Slowly, she

slid open her eyes and was met with an intense gaze. Deep brown eyes, so dark the pupils blended with the irises, stared into her own. The man's face was gentle, smooth and free of stubble, but the planes of his face were hard lines and a scar marred his left cheek.

She let out the breath she'd been holding in an attempt to calm her wayward magic, and the motion blew the dark bangs from her eyes. Her hair had yet to take on the silvery and salt and pepper grey of her sister's. Something in the action amused the man and he laughed. It was a smooth sound, and she pictured water effortlessly flowing in the stream near her sisters' awkward tree home or the slide of her silk yellow dress over her arms as she dressed. It was pleasing and sent another wave of tremors through her. The sensation shocked her. She had looked upon men of the court plenty and this one did not ring any bells. Nor had anyone ever elicited a feeling of, well, of what must be desire in her.

She focused for a moment on him. The richness of his eyes and the stark handsomeness of his face that was cut with an ugly mark—one only a knight would truly bare—make her feel something warm. She reflected as her body seemed to heat from within, simmering and sizzling with the urge to run her fingertips over the scar.

Desire, it had to be. It felt like an intensified version of what she wished for when she sought her sisters out, only to be shot down time and time again. This would be no different. Species didn't co-mingle and he certainly was only doing the chivalrous thing and checking in on a female who appeared to have drunk too much ale at a party.

His hand reached out to take hers, and the heat pleased her. She smiled to no one at all and let the deep, gruff sound of his voice, such a stark contrast to his laugh, float over her ears.

“My lady, are you well?”

“I am fine, sir. Thank you for your concern. I seem to be a little light in the head. It is time I retire.” She watched the tension drain from his face as he gave a nod of understanding, but he did not make a move to drop her hand.

“May I escort you, or are you not a visitor seeking sleep in the castle?”

She knew she flushed then. *Embarrassment. Something else new*, she thought. The man could bring about a lot of firsts in her if she didn’t leave him at once.

“I am a visitor, yes, but I do not reside within these walls for the length of my stay. Thank you for your kindness. I assure you, it will strike none as odd if I do not have an escort.”

His brow crinkled and she wondered what thoughts were running through his head. He opened his mouth as if to speak, but closed it, and after placing a quick kiss to the back of her palm, he bowed and rescinded from her. Her hand was warm and tingled where his lips had touched, and remained that way as she quickly flew through the castle rooms, unconcerned if any saw a fairy in yellow and thought she were an agent of darkness. Her thoughts were on the knight, and of the magic she was going to need to make him hers.

## Chapter 2

Maleficent. The name was a chant, a mantra of a sort in Sela's mind. The only way she would ever be able to act on any sort of interest with the handsome knight from the wedding party would be to be human. Not her rule really, from all her watching, humans seem to have a hang up about being with anyone outside of their own race. Only dark magic would be strong enough to fully transform her—permanently. Even if it didn't work out with whoever the knight turned out to be, at least she would be free of her useless magic and uncaring sisters.

In the days prior, Prince Philip had killed Maleficent, a gesture even she had thought was wonderful when she'd heard. It had brought with it the hope that maybe her sisters would actually teach her how to use her magic, rather than simply tossing book after book at her. Instead, she'd remained in the shadows of their lives and that had been the stinging smack across the face that had sent her to the castle tonight. She'd been planning on renouncing them anyway, to tell them off and show her magic to the court while offering her services should her sisters be unavailable. All of which she could still do after fixing the problem of Maleficent's demise. Dead wasn't dead if you had the right spells and acted quickly enough. Maleficent would never be able to be corporeal again, but her soul, well that shouldn't be missing quite yet—assuming there was one left after what the dark witch had done in the name of power.

“Well now, I need the one book they didn't toss at me. Shame they never took to hiding it.” Her wings fluttered, unhindered in the warm summer night air. Slowly, the strange cottage built into the bottom of a tree



came into view. She was flying from over the cliff, the chimney coming into view first, with the ever turning paddle wheel shortly after the peak of the roof. Sela stopped mere inches from the door and looked over the house with disgust.

The tiny shack of a cottage had housed all four of the fairy sisters and their parents, once. After her sister's blatant abuse and her father running out, she had found no need for the home. She hadn't been able to get anything there that she couldn't get anywhere else, except access to some powerful spell books, and she was positive her stodgy trio of older sisters wouldn't have moved a thing.

Standing in front of the quaint grey-white door, she smirked. "Thanks for not teaching me anything, sisters. You've made this decision so much easier on me." She slid her slender wand from where she had concealed it in the breast of dress while she flew, and flicked her wrist. Tiny sparks of bright yellow danced over the iron lock. With a click, it disengaged, opening her sisters' home and all the spell books within it to her.

Her eyes widened like saucers at the scene before her. Her sisters had completely cleaned the once cluttered cabin. She'd known they had to hide all magic from the princess, but this looked as if mundane wives or hermits had taken up residence. The bookshelf held nothing but a few small tomes, the table held a small vial of what appeared to be daisies. Gone were the clutter of open books spread about the floor and the mislabeled and scattered spell ingredients.

"This may be far harder than I had thought." She'd been counting on the cluttered mess to lead her to the hiding spot for the book of dark magic. Her sisters may have been dirtier than a pig in mud, but they never moved the dark tome.

Her eyes scanned the cottage. “If I were a dark and nasty work of magic, where would I be hiding?” Tapping her finger on her chin she narrowed her amber eyes and slowly worked the cottage from top to bottom. The immaculateness of the cottage should have made the task easy. “Unless they aren’t hiding it in plain sight,” she grumbled and took another step into the cottage and shut the door behind her. The darkness swept over the room just as she had wanted and she raised her wand. Yellow sparks danced in the darkness as she flicked her wrist and sent a crackle of magic through the cottage.

She watched closely for anything concealed to show itself. Her eyes moved from the window, to the cooktop, and to the bedrooms with no sign of her magic clustering around something. Just as she was going to walk into the bedrooms, she noticed a circular gathering of magic mere inches from her feet on the floor. The sparks glowed bright against the dyed blue rug, and Sela’s mouth curved into a smile. “You all must be in there, mustn’t you?”

Leaning down, she peeled back the blue carpet from the floor. It was unusually heavy, and she suspected her sisters had charmed it. Making it harder to move meant a young princess was less likely to ever try to clean under it. As if on cue, a puff of dust sprayed upwards a few inches of the rug peeled off the floor. The grit swirled around her face, causing her to cough and her eyes to water.

“Damn it!” Twirling her wand, she dispersed the cloud of dust, and her eyes caught sight of a small, black metal loop.

“Enchanted, I suppose.” Sela didn’t even attempt to bend and pull the iron loop back. Instead, she ran her wand across the top of it and the hatch pulled up. It couldn’t have been terribly deep inside, because while they had quite a few spell books, Sela could easily count fifteen neatly lined up and

set in what must be a shallow pit. All except for one. Third from the right side, the large grey leather bound book seemed to be sitting up higher than the rest in the row.

Using her wand once again she levitated the big book—*Easy Spells for Gardening and Cooking*—and chuckled as she sent the title soaring across the room. Peering into the secret space, her eyes took on a twinkle. Sure enough, the small black book with writing made from melted silver, peered back up at her. It didn't look evil. In fact, it looked like something to be treasured, not thrown in the back of some stuffy hole.

She bent down and gently ran her index finger over the silver letters. A sharp jolt went through her finger, and she instinctively pulled it back. A red blister formed on the tip of it and she slid her finger over it, using the saliva to cool the burn.

“Maybe you aren't so beautiful after all.” Her eyes shifted to glance out of the wooden window slats. The dark of night was beginning to give way to a graying dawn. Wedding balls lasted long, but she was most certainly running out of time. Using her wand, she quickly levitated the book up into the air and left it hanging in suspension. Clearly, the backside could be placed down without creating a burn, but she had no idea what would happen when she opened it and the front binding touched the wooden counter.

The pages were just as beautiful as the outside. A kohl color was smeared over each page, the writing had been done in a script so faded she was worried she wouldn't be able to read it at all. The pages were lined with the same color markings in frilled circles. Meaningless, she was sure, but still adding to the dangerous beauty of the book. She faintly remembered her mother telling her that the dark book could entice people to open it and assumed that was what was wrong.

Sela moved her hand slowly over the top of the page with her wand, the pages turning in response to her magic and her will. She frowned as the book flew past far too quickly with no sign of soul raising present. Returning to the first page, she moved her hand slower, allowing each page to halt a mere moment before moving on.

“Aha!” The page seemed to give off a sort of glow once she had found it, and the spell seemed deliriously simple. Some simple herbs she had already seen on the countertops, and a brief incantation speaking the name of the spirit and the desire.

*Shouldn't the dark arts be harder than this?* Sela let the book close and safely floated it back into its given hole in the floor.

The quiet chatter of birds sounded outside, and her pulse quickened. She needed to hurry if she was going to get out of there without running into her sisters. She was hoping they were going to stay and witness the marriage consummation. The idea suddenly sent an image of the nobleman and her, bodies entwined and moans of passion on the air. She bit her lip so hard the metallic tang of blood filled her mouth, and she squeezed her eyes shut to gain focus.

Laying the rug back down over the secret hatch, she set about dumping the herbs onto the counter as the spell required. Thyme; to call forth the spirit itself for a few moments, Chamomile; to ensure the angry spirit can do no harm, and finally, Devil's Claw to raise the spirit itself. Sela hastily mixed the herbs together on the counter with her fingers before closing her eyes and focusing upon the image of Maleficent that she last remembered.

“Spirit of the dark enchantress, Maleficent. I call to you. I bind your spirit to my own, giving you time to rise from sunrise to sunset, from now until the morrow. I call to you spirit of the dark enchantress, Maleficent. I bind your spirit to my own.”

The cottage grew infinitely darker as the incantation rolled off Sela's tongue. A cold and clammy presence manifested in the room, wrapping around her and making her skin crawl. Had she known any emotions aside from jealousy and hate, she supposed she would know to be afraid, would know no good would come of binding herself to the enchantress and cease speaking immediately.

“Well, well. Such a surprise to be called forth by one such as you, child,” the deep voice crackled, and sent a shiver of something through Sela.

Her words cut off mid chant and her eyes slowly cracked open, taking in the apparition sharing the room with her.

# Chapter 3

The apparition of the once powerful enchantress was as impressive as the real woman had been. Her pale skin appeared to shimmer in this form, and her dark cape and horned hat were deep black against royal purple. Her golden staff, of course, was not with her, it was locked up in a tower with all the remaining sewing wheels in the kingdom. Sela had no idea if the woman could do anything without the staff, but she hadn't had the foresight to grab it. However, not having it didn't change the power that resonated off of Maleficent. Even in death, she brought something unnamed into the room, something dark. If it hadn't been for the way she shimmered when she moved, Sela would have believed the flesh and blood enchantress had joined her—and that would have been a mistake even she didn't wish to make.

The clamminess in the room was oppressive, and she could hardly force her mouth to form the words to command the apparition. "I wish to strike a bargain."

"Go on, fairy. I may be a spirit, but I am not foolish. I know how long I have on Earth, and I know you control that. Why not make it quick, and let me return to my eternal slumber? I do not wish to linger here, in a plane where I can touch nothing, feel nothing," her eyes narrowed, "control nothing."

Sela slowly nodded, forgetting that it was she who held all the power in this scenario. "I wish for you to make me human." Maleficent raised her hand as if to comply but Sela put her own up. "I am not finished."

“I was not going to grant it. You spoke of a bargain. I would be a fool to move forward without hearing it all,” Maleficent’s voice was low and held all the darkness it had in life.

“I want you to make me human. I want to be young enough to marry, beautiful enough to draw a man’s eye and I want to know real emotions. I want to be able to love a young noble in return, although I feel something for him already that is not akin to the only emotions I have ever really known.” The words, once spoken, lifted an invisible weight off Sela’s shoulders. The request was not ridiculous, and it was a shame that only dark arts held the power to reverse the effects of aging. “I also want a love potion. A dark one, strong enough to seduce anyone whose lips it passes between. I want it potent.”

A strange smile took place on Maleficent’s mouth. Her white teeth shined against the blood red of her painted lips. “And in return, little fairy?”

The idea of being called a little fairy grated on Sela, but she wouldn’t say as much. She blew out a deep breath and locked her amber eyes to the enchantress seaweed green ones.

“In return, I will free your spirit. In exchange, you must also agree that you will harm none from this land.”

At her words, Maleficent’s eyebrows shot up. Again, fear would have set a normal fairy, or human, straight. But Sela could not feel fear. She had never known the emotion, and had no way of knowing the slight pinpricks of pain at the nape of her neck were a warning sign.

“And just why would you do that?”

“I want to know what it’s like to not be left out. I...I saw a man at the royal wedding. One who stirred emotion in me, as I said. I want a life with him. I want to not be the outcast little sister. I want to have it all. With your promise that you will harm none from this land, I know the royals and

myself are safe. Should you choose to rule another land, it is not my problem.” She watched, her eyes still level with Maleficent’s, as the moments seemed to stretch. The light streaming through the slats in the windows was golden now. She had but a few minutes to strike this bargain.

Maleficent said nothing. She stood perfectly still, in the same spot she had been the entire time. Sela began to wonder if the enchantress was playing with her, wasting her time, when the woman suddenly spoke.

“It is done, little fairy. Do not forget our bargain. I will be waiting.” She seemed to vanish into thin air, and Sela couldn’t help but wonder where she had gone.

“You aren’t supposed to be able to leave!” She kicked the floor and cursed. “You’re supposed to do what I asked you, stupid witch!” She threw her hands up, wand sparkling, and fixed the cabin with a disgruntled snort. “Stupid witch, I knew not to trust her. Oh well, not like she can get out. When the sun sets tonight, she’ll be gone again.” Sela went to fly out the door and nothing happened. Startled, she reached a hand behind her back and stretched uncomfortably. But she felt nothing. Her wings were tiny, but she had always been able to feel them before.

Racing across the house she stopped in front of the mirrored shard that served to view one’s reflection in her sister’s bedroom. The face that reflected back at her was her own, but different. The wrinkles of age that had kissed the corners of her eyes and mouth were gone. The small stains upon her teeth were missing, and her eyes glowed with a youth she was not familiar with.

“It worked,” Sela’s voice was a gasp as she ran her hand over her face. *But what of the love potion?* she thought, pressing a hand against the small pocket in her yellow dress. Sure enough, she felt the round shape of a potion vial and didn’t bother to pull it out. Stalling as she looked at herself,



she jolted when she heard her sisters' voices coming near the cottage. "Shit!" Looking down at the wand in her hand, she was pleased to see that her magic was still there. Creating a cloak of sorts around herself, she quickly squeezed out of the cottage door as her sisters stepped in from the wedding.

A safe distance from the cottage, she finally stopped walking and dropped the magic shielding her. "Time to catch a knight, Sela. Time to not be left out again."

# Chapter 4

Alric de Genise chuckled as he hooked the quiver onto his back. “Philip, your jealousy at my superior hunting skills is amusing.” He felt the clap on his back just as Philip’s red clad leg flew next to his head as the prince mounted his steed.

“Yes, but when you slay a fire breathing dragon, that is really an evil enchantress, then we can discuss who is truly superior.” Philip flashed a grin at him before turning his horse in the direction of the castle. “Everyone good to return to the keep? I have a bride awaiting me?”

“And a bed that needs warming!” The comment came from the back of the hunting line and sounded like Timothy.

The good natured rib sent rolling laughter through the eight man hunting party, and Philip’s grin deepened as he shook his head. “I’ll not sully my wife’s name by speaking of how I impress her.”

Alric laughed and tossed his worn boot onto the stirrup and mounted his horse, Kohl. He ran a hand down the horse’s flank, a greeting that was really a ritual when he mounted and patted the horse twice to complete the gesture.

“And now if we’re all well and ready—” A crackling sound in the bushes behind Alric turned his head and stopped Philip from speaking.

A sharp cry sounded through the trees, and all eight men were back off their horses, swords drawn at the ready. Philip, ever the hero, took to the front, with Alric right beside him—as he always would be. Philip glowered at Alric and shoved him back slightly. The movement raised a growl from his throat, but he did as the prince wanted. He may be second in command,

but he knew when to not push Philip, and a few short days after the death of the witch was definitely one of those days.

Philip led, his sword extended in front of him, as he pushed back the dense foliage. The plants gave way and the ground was littered with shrubs and thorns from plants. Philip exhaled sharply and Alric's gaze snapped to the ground. A maid lay, bare as the day she had entered the world, with blood trickling down her forehead. Her black hair fell in thick curls down to her waist, her breasts were bare and exposed and it sent a lick of desire through Alric at an entirely inappropriate time.

"Stay back. I don't know if whatever did this lurks." He moved passed Philip, not caring if the prince wanted him to be the one to search the female or not. He bent down and placed a hand to her throat, a pulse flickered, oddly strong given her condition. "She lives." His arms reached under her back and he heaved her up into his arms. "We must take her back with us. Whoever did this to her could strike again."

He began to walk towards the group and Philip's color palled. Worry was evident in his gaze, and Alric had to bite back the desire to ask if he'd ever brought harm to his liege before. He kept walking, despite the look, and when he slung her over Kohl and mounted him, the others silently returned to their own horses and mounted.

Philip looked sideways at Alric as he repositioned the maiden. Unclipping his cloak, he laid it over her, covering her from wandering eyes.

Alric tersely nodded at Philip before kicking Kohl in the sides and beginning back. The laughter and jovial taunts didn't resume. No one would say it, but picking up a maiden—even a naked one—was a danger. Evil lurked behind many faces, and they had no idea if they were really safe from Maleficent.

Alric could hear the crunch of the twigs beneath Kohl's feet, could hear the inhaled and exhaled breaths of the hunting party. It sent a wave of ire through him. Their duty was to protect, he would not feel guilty for doing that. Grabbing hold of the maiden's shoulder to keep her on Kohl, he kicked him in the ribs and galloped to castle, leaving the hunting party and his majesty behind.



Gently, he set the female on his bed. She looked as if she belonged amongst his mess of furs and wooden canopy. He did his best to quietly remove his armor; he didn't wish to wake her until a healer could see to her needs.

"Where am I?" the voice was strong and feminine.

His body twitched with need to turn around and get answers from her, but brashness was not the solution with a damsel he had rescued from distress. Biting his lower lip, he tried to still the race of blood in his body, and turned to face her.

With her eyes open, she was far more enchanting than she had been while resting. The amber in them was like melted gold. They bore into him, as if she could see through him. He'd seen eyes like this before. An elder maid, well elder by comparison to his age, at the wedding feast. They'd enchanted him then as well. Perhaps this was the woman's daughter.

"Do not be afraid. You are safe here. I promise you, whomever attacked you cannot get to you." He swore he saw the barest flicker of a smile on her face. "I am Alric de Genise. I am Prince Philip's second, and we found you in a rather bad predicament while hunting."

She sat up in the bed, the cloak Philip had placed on her sliding off and exposing her once more.

Alric groaned softly.

“Why am I,” she looked around the room, “in a room? Should I not be with a physician? I remember gathering water and then a giant rock and nothing more.” The look in her eyes mimicked fear, but her voice was too calm—too strong.

Alric knew he should be wary, and yet, every fiber of his being wanted to cross the room and press his lips to hers. He longed to drink in the taste of her and see if she tasted of honey, a deep rich honey that would match the color of her eyes.

He cleared his throat. “I wanted to see you rest first. I can bring the castle healer now, or the fairies if you need your memory returned, so that we might catch who attacked you.”

Her color paled and she bolted off the bed. Afraid she would fall, he stepped in her path. Her breasts crushed against his cloth covered chest, and he let his nose fall into her hair. She did smell of honey. He didn’t know why he had thought she would, but he’d been right, and his mouth watered as he wondered if she tasted as sweet.

“Please no! Not the fairies. I assure you that it must have been a falling rock slide. There is no guilty party, save for my own clumsiness!” her voice was shrill and real fear echoed there.

Her hand touched his cheek, and a strong sensation went through him. He couldn’t stop himself as she pressed her lips to his. Desire coursed through his body. His hands aggressively kneaded in her thick hair, forgetting the trickle of blood and the possible pain she could be in. She moaned softly and stepped up on her tip toes, angling their bodies together and sliding her tongue over the crease of his lips.

Lost in a haze, only the knock at the door cooled him down. His mouth stopped moving on hers, but his body still pressed dangerously close to her

naked warmth. Alric pulled back, pushing her at the same time. She looked up at him, startled as he stepped back, putting his hand on the door.

“Forgive me, Lady—”

“Sela,” her voice was deep, and she hadn’t taken her eyes off him.

“Lady Sela. I forgot myself.” Without another word he tugged upon the door for the physician to come in. He hadn’t called for the old woman but she did have a way of knowing just when she was needed, or maybe one of the others had. It was lucky for the maid, for Sela.

He nodded at the older woman and then turned back to Sela. “I have guard duty, but... but I’ll return this night.” Then to the healer, “She is not to be removed from my chambers. She is my guest here.” Alric didn’t wait for a response, but he seldom did when speaking to people beneath him.

He could hear how loudly his boots echoed off the stone walls and he realized he’d left his sword. “Bloody hell!” He would have to obtain one from the armory because if he went back in there he wouldn’t be such a gentleman to the lady. A smile spread at the thought. Perhaps she wasn’t virtuous. She hadn’t responded like she was. “Good, then I’ll bed her and be rid of this need too. It’s been too long apparently.” Turning towards the armory, content with his plan, Alric whistled as he went.

# Chapter 5

Sela couldn't breathe, or felt like she wasn't. Certainly she knew she was, or she wouldn't still be standing. The physician had left after giving her tonic water and checking her stability. Hitting herself with a rock had been foolish. She should've used her magic, but she hadn't wanted evidence of the wand lying anywhere near her.

Her head still throbbed a touch where she'd smashed her skull, her lips and body throbbed harder. He'd touched her. No one had ever touched her in such a fashion. It didn't even bother her that he had treated her like a tavern whore. She rolled her fingers in the air and yellow sparks twirled about as the love potion appeared.

"Looks like I won't be needing you anymore." She grinned down at the vial and raised to dump its contents out the open window. It felt shameful to dispel anything Maleficent had created, but if his reactions to her had been any sign, she didn't need it and she'd much rather have his affection on her own.

"Perhaps I should hold up my end of the bargain. It would seem there is no reason to delay." Her mind was already conjuring up images of what was to come with the noble, whose name she still didn't know. Did she really need to release the enchantress? It was not as if Maleficent could do her any harm. Without the end of the spell, she would vanish back to where her spirit had previously been when the sun went down—for good.

*But if she can make you young, can make you feel and make others feel something for you, what else can she do?* The thought was a drug. It was true. She could renege on the deal, only allow the spirit to come and go as it

pleased her. Aligning oneself with so much darkness was toxic though. An emotion she wasn't familiar with—*is it fear*—swirled through her. She didn't want that kind of power, didn't want the consequences. For all purposes, she had got what she wanted and Maleficent could very well go off and be some terror in another land far away.

“Yes, best to get rid of Maleficent now. I do not need this hanging around my brain.”

Sela was wrapped in a scratchy muslin cloth that the older lady had brought and she saw no reason to remain wearing it. When her noble came back from his duty, she would not be needing anything. Her body burned with a desire she didn't know she could feel. When she'd been in his arms, she'd finally felt like she mattered. It was nice, feeling the desire. It was so much hotter than the jealousy and anger that had always fueled her actions.

Naked, she walked to the center of the room. The release had already begun back in the cottage. All that had been left to do was to choose whether or not to speak the words that would make the act final. “Maleficent, dark enchantress, I have called to your spirit and now I release it. I release it,” she whispered the final sentence. Sela had no idea why, but the chill in the air unsettled her.

Just as it had before, a swirling green smoke wafted in the tower room, and Maleficent slowly shimmered into focus. Still nothing more than a spirit, but free to come and go as she pleased.

Sela tensed, not really sure what was going to occur. Her body shook; she was beginning to think asking for any sort of emotional charge-up was a mistake. “We had a deal,” her voice trembled, matching the shake in her body.

“Do not fear, little fairy. That we did.” The smile on the enchantress's face was unnerving. “I shall go. I would thank you, but I did just as much



for you. Do not forget that. Should you speak of this to anyone and send this band of guards after me, well remember, my magic still works as a spirit. You've seen that for yourself."

Sela nodded and ran her hands over her arms. The temperature in the room had dropped, and not simply because night had fallen. Had the enchantress been able to glean her thoughts about caging her? A chill spread out through her, and she ran her hands over her body quicker, trying to stop the cold and slowly realizing that fear was not something you could simply turn off.

*Why did I have to ask for emotions?*

Maleficent's eyes bore into her own. She swallowed hard and took a small step back. "I understand." She lowered her eyes to the ground and slightly bowed her head. While the enchantress might not be royalty, Sela didn't want a fight, she only wanted to get rid of the woman and go back to the beginning of the life she had essentially just created.

"Good. I would hate to think we have a misunderstanding, especially after your happily ever after seems to be coming along so swimmingly with... what was his name?" Her voice had taken on a steely tone, and again, Sela took a step back. She was having trouble taking solace in the knowledge that a spirit was always just a spirit, because Maleficent would be powerful in any form.

"I don't know his name."

A nasty smile curved up on the enchantress's lips.

Sela felt small, weak and as if her sisters were in the room. *What is the enchantress playing at, and why is it causing this wave of queasiness?*

"Perhaps that is because, although I made you younger and by far nicer to look upon than you were, you're nothing more than a whore out on display awaiting a good bedding."

She gasped as Maleficent took a step forward, a step closer.

“Perhaps all that you’d hoped this would be is nothing more than a trap in the hay for him? Trust me, the best laid plans and all that, and yours wasn’t even well planned.”

Sela wished she could feel nothing but hatred and jealousy again. She wanted to go back to feeling no emotion so that she wouldn’t feel the pain at what had occurred. Sela’s eyes squeezed shut, the darkness doing nothing to ban the words from looping across her mind’s eye.

Before she could respond, the door to the room slammed open. The crash of wood against stone caused her eyes to fly open again and she turned to look at who had entered to witness her treacherous bargain in the midst of being completed. It was him, her knight. His name didn’t matter, they would have time to discuss that. She simply needed to convince him to allow Maleficent to leave.

The man’s deep voice shouted at her and her eyes locked on his. Standing in the doorway; the armor gleaming, his hair tussled and the look of something akin to protection in his eye was all it took to wash out the evil that had begun to creep in.

“Lady Sela! Get back, it is Maleficent!”

She didn’t know where he had procured a sword from, but one glittered in his hands as he held it in front of his face, point tipped at Maleficent.

“Guards!”

Sela felt as if her blood ran cold at the sound of the knight’s voice. Her eyes darted back and forth between him and Maleficent. She could see the hatred pouring from every muscle in the knight’s body and could hear the footsteps of more guards coming to aide his call. She felt dizzy, her throat was dry and felt as if long, tendrils were wrapped around her neck, crushing her windpipe and turning her vision black.

“Take your hands off her you witch. Do it, or I’ll kill you again!” her brave knight’s voice cut through the haze.

Raising her hands to her neck, she found that there were indeed fingers wrapped around her throat—fingers that should not be able to do that. *Maleficent is nothing more than a spirit with some magic juice. How had she manifested a hold on anything?*

A laugh. Maleficent’s throaty laugh slithered past her thoughts, deep and loud, as her fingers slowly uncurled from Sela’s neck. She shoved her, tossing her body straight into the knight’s.

“Didn’t think I could do that did you, little fairy? Well that’s why you shouldn’t play around with magic you don’t understand.” A lime green smoke rose from the floor, it twisted and curled around the enchantress like a snake getting ready to strike. “There’s much more to raising a spirit than simply letting them out.” Her hand shot out and a flicker of current traveled from the tip of her black nail straight into Sela’s stomach.

She doubled over in pain and felt the man pull her upright. The man, the knight, that’s who it all had been for. They’d vanquished her before, surely they could do it again. She wrapped her fingers around his forearm, as much of it as she could at least. His eyes met hers and the fierce anger didn’t radiate from them. Instead, they softened as he looked at her and his mouth had a small smile on it.

“Lady Sela. You’re hurt. Do not move. We have taken her down before and will again. I promise you.”

Hope and light shined out of his eyes and she wanted to trust him, to believe that just once there would be someone in her life looking out for her. She hadn’t felt the pain in her stomach, didn’t want to tell him that though. Moments like this were what knights were for.

“I trust you. But, what is your name?”

Alric couldn't break his gaze from Sela's. He heard the shout as Timothy and two others entered into his bedchambers and saw the witch. He shouldn't be t asking right now. His hand should be doing more than holding onto a helpless female, but he didn't want to be. Her question was so strange at first, and then he realized what he'd done. He'd almost bedded a woman without even introducing himself.

"Alric, my lady. And after we have had the pleasure of dispatching this vile creature, I promise you there will be plenty more to know of me." His voice held a promise and his lips pressed against hers. They didn't linger for longer than a moment, but it was enough to set his body on fire.

A sharp shout drew him away from Sela and back to the danger in the room. Marcus lay on the floor, his body smoking and tiny green flames licking up and down his torso. The screaming grew worse, and Alric watched in horror as the other guard rolled, trying to cease the flames or perhaps end the pain. Without warning, the flames erupted and the screams that Alric heard would forever haunt him.

Grabbing his sword off the floor where he had dropped it to face Maleficent, he rotated it around in his hand. "Enough! It's time for you to stay dead." He didn't think, just ran headlong, sword extended, towards her. The jarring pain that ran up his arm as the sword crashed into the wall stunned him.

"My aren't we full of hubris, human? It is no matter. I will do away with all of you."

"But we had a deal! You weren't to harm any here!"

Sela's voice knocked him sideways. *A deal?* He struggled to pull the tip of the sword from the stone wall and turned. Sela was standing, her fingers flickering ever so lightly with yellow sparks. There was nothing he could

do. Something was amiss with the two women and he would see about Sela's role in it all once Maleficent was returned to the grave.

"Yes, well, like I said, the best laid plans." The laughter filled his ears, almost blocking out the sounds of agony that the remaining two guards were causing. He wasn't on fire though. In fact, he was completely fine.

Resituating the sword, he lunged for Maleficent again, the blade slicing clean through. Clean through nothing but air. She turned and her smile was pure evil, her eyes reflected the green flames flickering in their center.

"Your little maiden there forgot to mention a few details, didn't she?"

"Leave Lady Sela out of this, witch. She has nothing to do with this. Your magic clearly extended farther than we knew." His words held all the conviction he could muster. Lady Sela had to be innocent. *Or is she? Could that be the reason for the attraction?*

Before he knew what had happened, he felt his body lift off the ground. He hung, suspended in the middle of the room for a second, and then, Maleficent threw his body headfirst into the stone wall as if he weighed nothing.

# Chapter 6

The scream tore from her throat. Her eyes blurred as she watched Alric's body slide down the wall. She raced over to him, not bothering to dodge the flames flickering over the charred bodies on the floor. The burn of fire grazed the soles of her feet with every step, but she didn't stop until she reached Alric.

Sela dropped to the floor and picked his head up. His body was limp, and she could feel the warm stickiness of blood matting his beautiful hair under her fingers. Tears, hot as the fire in the room, slid down her face. Her eyes frantically roamed over his body, looking for a sign of life, something that would let her know he was only injured.

She found nothing.

There was no life left in her knight. Alric's eyes were locked in a look of confusion, and his chest didn't rise and fall with even the smallest of breaths. Maleficent had taken him from her, she'd broken the bargain and was walking towards the door.

Fury gripped Sela as she gently lay Alric down, praying that the flames would not consume his body. Sparks of magic danced around her, she didn't have control over it. There had never been anyone around to teach her not to go off like a ticking time bomb when she was angry, and she knew how to be angry.

The sparks jumped off her and landed here and there amongst the things in the room. She wasn't concerned. There was nothing left to save anyway. She raised her hand and pictured a long stream of magic pouring into the enchantress's back, but as Alric's sword had, it went right through. So Sela

tried again. She heard a grunt and a thud and for a moment she realized, she must have hit another guard that had joined the fight, but she couldn't see with her eyes closed.

"Maleficent! Stop!" Prince Philip's voice boomed in the hallway, and Sela stopped as well. He wasn't the helpless young boy anymore. He was a man who had slain a dragon for love, and it had changed him.

"Do you think you can stop me? I'm dead. dear Philip. Dead and raised and nothing can harm a spirit once it's been untethered from the one who summoned it."

"Who would do such a thing?" Philip sounded incredulous, and the weight of Sela's actions slowly began to sink in and weigh her down.

*What have I done?* Her magic continued to spark around her as she closed the distance between herself and the other two. "I did your majesty," her voice was strong, laced with the anger reserved only for Maleficent.

"Then you're as guilty as she and will be tried. I told Alric not to touch you when we found you laying there."

His words were venomous and she gasped. He was right. It was her fault that Alric was dead. Her stupid desire for someone to care about her had gotten him killed.

"It was an accident," Sela's voice was so low she doubted anyone would have heard it.

A streak of green fire danced in front of Philip and she heard the prince growl.

"To be fair, the little fairy really didn't know I was untrustworthy. Pathetic really, the things people do for love." Maleficent lashed out with her hand and Sela heard Philip gasp as the green flames tore through the fabric of his cloak. He hadn't bothered to dress for battle, had only come running to save his men. Something that could get him killed.

“Stand down Maleficent. I won’t ask you again.” Philip’s voice didn’t waiver.

Sela prayed he could do something, but she knew that without her sisters and without magic, there honestly was nothing that could undo a risen spirit.

“Really, Philip, this is getting tiring.” The enchantress raised a hand, and with it, Philip lifted off the floor. “It’s not nearly as poetic as you slaying a dragon, but it will have to do.”

Sela, merely a few steps behind Maleficent, shot her own hand out and grabbed the witch. Her hand slid through the spiritual form, in fact, she was almost standing inside of the spirit itself.

“Time to die, Prince Philip,” the sneer in her voice was prevalent as she moved to aim him at the wall.

Sela heard Aurora’s voice shouting at them, and Maleficent paused as the princess ran up to them, a crew of guards at her flank and Flora, Fauna and Merryweather flying slightly ahead of her, something round in their hands.

“Ahh much more than I could have hoped for. Not only can your watch your beloved die as poor little Sela did, but now I don’t have to go through any trouble tracking you down.”

Philip’s body flew toward the far wall, just as a shattering sound snapped Sela from her trance. Instead of crashing headfirst into a wall, the prince’s body had taken the impact, and he had crumpled to the floor.

“No! It cannot be!” Maleficent dove for a shiny piece of green glass on the floor nearest to her. “You cannot have done this! Only a fool would have smashed that orb. The power it held—”

Aurora’s voice was cold as she cut her off, “The power plenty strong enough to send you back to your grave in one sense or another.” The news



shocked Sela. The book had mentioned a source of power could trap a released spirit. But she had never thought it would be as simple as her own power source.

Maleficent clutched at the tiny pieces of glass. “But how? Never mind, it doesn’t matter.” She went to rise and aimed a bolt of green fire where Aurora hung over Philip. Sela watched, stunned, as her sisters flew in front of the royal couple, holding a large chunk of the orb.

The fire bounced as if hitting a wall and set a tapestry ablaze.

“We bind you, Maleficent. We bind your spirit to what was once your source of power. Forever to remain within the glass, looking out, but never getting out,” her sisters’ voices chanted as one.

A surge of wind kicked up around her and Maleficent. Sela scrambled to break out of the spirit, but she couldn’t. She couldn’t seem to pull her way out, it was as if she stuck inside. Panic grabbed at her and she flung her hands, but the magic wasn’t as strong without the wand to channel it, and she wasn’t able to anchor onto anything.

She felt the floor move under her. Her eyes dropped to watch as she was lifted, along with Maleficent, towards her sisters. “Sisters! Sisters stop this. Please help me. All I wanted was a chance.”

Flora shook her head and sighed. “Sela, you don’t play with what you don’t understand. You summoned her, you released, you’re her anchor. You will go where she goes.” Her sister almost looked displeased, but none of the three made a move to help her or to stop it as her body moved toward the glass with Maleficent screaming so loudly she felt she might go deaf.

Then, it was all done. Confused, Sela spun around. She was looking straight at Maleficent, whose eyes burned with rage.

“You, you insolent, incompetent little fairy! This is all your fault!” A streak of flames whizzed past and bounced off a wall Sela hadn’t even seen.

Her eyes widened at what she saw. Her sister's eyes were gigantic and Prince Philip stood behind her. They looked enormous, they were enormous.

"We're trapped," her voice was laced with defeat as she put her hand up the glass. She had no energy to do anything except let it squeak down. *How can it be possible? Why had the book not spoken of such a possibility?* "Now you get it. Trapped with a pathetic excuse for a fairy, and I can't even hurt you because we're linked together!"

The rant didn't even reach Sela's ears. She was too busy listening to the garbled words outside her prison.

"There's nothing that can be done. She made her path when she chose to raise Maleficent's spirit. I don't think it matters what her reasons were. They're tied together and when she stood within the spirit, she sealed her fate completely," Fauna's voice held real sorrow and Sela almost got caught up on that more so than the words her sister spoke.

"Fauna, we must put this away. Lock it up somewhere," Merryweather sounded her usual panicked self.

"Let me take it. Please. I can have a blacksmith fashion it into a pendant. I want it with me. I want to know this evil can never seek the light of day again."

Aurora's words shocked Sela, but she couldn't blame the princess.

"So be it then." Fauna looked into Sela's eyes again. "We should have been better to you, we could have prevented this." With small tears in her eyes, Fauna passed the glass holding her and Maleficent to Prince Philip, who thankfully appeared uninjured.

Tears streaked down her face. She was numb, utterly and completely frozen in horror at what she had done. Alric was dead, and yet she couldn't even bring herself to feel pain in that. It was over. She had unleashed a

monster, and now fate had her sealed up with the very thing that she had intended to free.

Philip's hand closed over the glass containing them, blocking their vision and silencing Sela's mind forever to anything but thoughts of what she had done and Maleficent's empty threats.



# The Singing Bones

\*This story is written in UK English\*

## Sinead MacDughlas

I've never been one to believe in magic, not the wizards and dragons type anyway. For me, enchantment is found in the small miracles of life; in the blooming of flowers and the appearance of a rainbow; in the laughter of a child, or the flight of a hummingbird. Most of all, for me, music is magic.

Have you ever done something impulsive, something seemingly innocuous, which changed everything you thought you knew? I bought something at a flea market. That's it.



I didn't even want to go, but one of my colleagues dragged me out, insisting that I must do more than work and sleep. That was easy enough for Petra to say. She was born with a bow in her hand and a Stradivarius tucked under her chin. Literally. Her parents fell in love in the pit of a Broadway musical for cripe's sake! That was before they gained tenure with the orchestra, and her father became a first chair violinist. Her mother had been second chair until she retired.

Petra didn't *need* to practice her instrument every waking moment. She'd glided into third chair as easily as a swan glides through water, while I was more like a dog, paddling for all I was worth just to keep my head up. There was never any doubt that Petra would get tenure. I just prayed that I could cling to fourth chair flutist.

It was hard to be jealous of Petra, though. She was so full of joy for the music, as well as life. When she burst in, flashing that brilliant smile of hers and fluttering her lashes, insisting that I join her on a field trip, I conceded with only a little grumbling.



“Isn’t this *adorable*?” Her voice cut through the crowd at a pitch that could likely summon every dog within earshot. It was impossible to pretend I didn’t know her while her dainty arm was hooked through mine in visible sisterhood.

She released my arm to pluck her find out of a box of clothing. “This” was a T-shirt bearing the slogan *Mozart Lives* and a tragic drawing of the great composer in a white, spangled jumpsuit.

“*Please* tell me you’re not buying that.” I rolled my eyes at her.

“Why not? It’s so fun!”

“It’s appalling.”

I almost laughed as she pouted and tossed her red curls.

“Well, *I* think it’s fabulous, and I’m buying it.” She handed the man tending the stall five dollars for the T-shirt, and guided me to the next stall. This one was crowded with old furniture.

“I need a coffee,” she announced, suddenly. “Keep looking, Cynical Cindy. Maybe you’ll find something old and creepy that will capture your twisted heart.”

I laughed at her back as she glided off toward the snack stand. It was a standing joke between us. To Petra, I was Cynical Cindy, and when I teased her, I called her Perky Petra. It should have been impossible for us to share a living space, but being polar opposites actually made us the best of friends, as well as compatible roommates.

She wasn’t wrong, either. I’d always had a predilection for the macabre. When I’d become enamoured, some years ago, of the lyre possessed by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Petra had been just as disgusted as I was with her choice of T-shirt. It was constructed of antelope horns with a human skull base, skin, gut and hair. It looked like something out of a horror

movie. Despite her teasing, she'd proudly presented me with a beautiful flute of carved hawk bone for my twenty-fifth birthday.

In the decade since, my collection of morbid musical instruments had grown substantially. I now had several bone, antler and ivory flutes, all antiques I'd found in various auctions. One of the percussionists had helped me obtain a Tibetan skull drum, made of authentic human skulls. There were horns and trumpets, a deer hoof rattle, and an authentic set of bones, the precursor of the American spoons. I also had a small fiddle with human bone pegs, scroll, and tailpiece, which Petra refused to touch, even to dust.

It seemed serendipitous, therefore, that moments after Petra teased me, I opened the drawer of a pitifully abused side-table, to discover a yellowed, obviously hand-made, pan-flute.

"How much for this?" I tried to feign weary indifference, as I held up the flute to the bottle-blonde woman hovering nearby.

"Where did *that* come from?" she muttered, half to herself.

Her attention was on a young couple gushing over a ratty old armoire, and she didn't look pleased about the distraction. Without taking her eyes off the couple, she grabbed the offending item, put it to her lipstick crimsoned mouth, and blew. No sound emerged, other than the whistle from her pursed lips.

"Hmph! It's busted," she grumbled, and turned toward a trash can behind her, holding the flute in the tips of her manicured fingers.

"I might be able to fix it. I'll give you ten dollars for it."

"Sure." She turned back and dropped the flute into my hands. "It's your money, lady."

She snatched the ten dollars from my hand, eager to get to the more lucrative furniture sale, just as Petra sailed back over with two cups of coffee in hand. I hid the flute behind my back.



“You *bought* something?” Petra looked around at the furniture, visibly restraining her pert upper lip from curling. “What is it, and where will we put it?”

“Don’t worry. It fits in my purse. Can I borrow your new T-shirt to wrap it in, though?”

Her chin tilted down and she peered at me sideways, the way one looks at a potential mugger.

I laughed and produced the flute for her inspection.

“Is that bone?” she asked cautiously.

“I’m pretty sure.”

“Animal bone?”

“I don’t know. Probably.”

“Fine.” She handed me the shirt. “But if that thing is human bone, I may never forgive you.”

“I’m sure it’s bird, deer or some other animal, Petra. It’s as old as the hills. Don’t be such a wuss.”

I wrapped the flute in the shirt, put the package in my purse, and took the coffee she’d bought for me.

“I have to admit. This was fun.”

□ □ □

A quick rinse with some soapy water removed all the dust the flute had accumulated. After the cleaning, it was ghostly white, with a slight sheen like it had been waxed or varnished. Even though my knowledge of how to play pan flute was sketchy at best, it produced music that was hauntingly beautiful. One of the other flutists claimed significant training, but none of them could get it to produce a note. It was a curious and slightly creepy anomaly.

“It’s like it was meant just for you, Cindy,” Stephen proclaimed. “You should play it for Anthony.”



Anthony Greco was our Composer Laureate, and a connoisseur of instruments. A small man, with a huge presence, I’d found him rather intimidating at first. He was incredibly friendly, though. Even in his tuxedo, with his salt and pepper hair in a tidy ponytail, he exuded welcome. He’d shown great interest, and perhaps a little envy, for my skeletal collection. The pan flute was an intriguing delight to him. My claim that no one else could play it captivated him even more than the instrument itself. He tried, and failed, to prove me wrong, and then applauded my own performance with tears in his bright blue eyes.

“It is a mournful little flute, and quite fascinating. Where did you find it?”

“At a flea market, of all places.”

“So you know nothing of its origin or construction?”

“Only that it appears to be hand-made of bone.”

“We must find out more!” I had never seen Anthony so animated, but his excitement was contagious.

“Perhaps I *could* look for a specialist in these things.”

“I know just the person!” he declared, excitedly. “An anthropologist friend of mine could help us. His name is Graf Thomas von der Meier. Please, let me call him for—”

A scream tore the air asunder. Anthony dropped the flute on the floor. We rushed to his open window to look for the source. It was a male voice, and it sounded like someone being murdered, but we couldn’t see anything.

After a minute or two, I called 911 while Anthony continued to scan the street.

The police arrived a lot faster than I'd anticipated. Two SUVs pulled up, blocking the street on both sides of the Brownstone. When they pounded on the door, I opened it immediately. The first officer I saw had his hand on his gun. There were seven more behind him, all in tactical gear.

"Is everything alright here, ma'am?" The young officer eyed Anthony suspiciously.

"We're fine, thank you, officer. We called because—"

"*You* called?" he glanced at the officer behind him. "We're here to investigate the scream one of your neighbours heard coming from this address."

"But we're the only people here. We called because we heard the scream too, and thought it must be coming from outside."

Even as I said the words, I began to doubt. The sound was so loud, maybe it *did* come from inside the house.

"We'd like to take a look around, if you don't mind." The second officer didn't look convinced.

"You're most welcome to do so," Anthony answered, "but is anyone checking out there?" He waved at the window.

The two officers entered swiftly, with two more following, before the senior officer responded. Even then, he didn't really answer.

"Baker, take your unit and check the street," he shouted over his shoulder.

The remaining four officers trotted back down the steps and fanned out in front of the house. After much opening and closing of doors, and several shouts of "Clear", the officers gathered in the foyer again.

“Thank you for your cooperation, sir.” The older officer was less taciturn now. “The other unit hasn’t found anything in the street, and all of your neighbours seem to be fine. If you hear or see anything else, don’t hesitate to call again.”

Anthony insisted on hailing a cab to take me home.



Perhaps the scream had unsettled my subconscious, or maybe it was the hoagie Petra and I had shared while we watched Paranormal Activity for the five hundredth time, but sleep was not my friend that evening. I woke several times, shaking and sweating, gasping for air, and every time I closed my eyes again, the nightmare came back. It continued in my sleep, like a serial short film I was forced to not just watch, but live.

The smells were real; earth, water, sweat...and blood.

First he punched me, the huge shadowy man who laughed and cursed me in his deep, rough voice. The words were foreign to me, but the lunatic rage was plain. Then the three, vicious stabs to the guts. The flow of the blood down my sides as I lay on the ground, the sense of weakness and desperation to escape, the screams I could not force from my throat as his hands crushed my larynx.

Then came the water, cold, so icy cold, I could hold my breath no longer, filling my mouth as he turned my face into the current, slicing down into my lungs as I screamed my silent screams. I thought it was over then. When I woke, shaking and sweating, grateful to realize that the myth about dying for real when you perish in a dream, was just that—a myth.

It wasn’t over, though. Not by far. When I finally succumbed to the exhaustion again, I had to lay immobile while he mutilated my body—my strangely male body— with a wicked-looking hunting knife. He grunted

and cursed while he broke bones and severed joints, first the extremities, and then my head.

I saw his face, then, as he propped my head up to witness the final atrocities. He removed my heart, squeezing it in his hand like a sponge until the blood barely trickled between his fingers. He grinned as he worked, a malicious, gratified leer worthy of the coldest serial murderer. Each rib was removed, scraped clean, rinsed in the river and then stacked neatly on the bank. The flesh he dumped into the river, the stripped bones, he carried under a nearby bridge where the ground was soft, and dug a hole with his hands. All of the bones went into the hole, one by one, as he muttered to himself.

At last, he turned his attention back to my head. He picked it up and looked deeply into my eyes, the madness fading now, but not the anger. He spoke some more words I didn't understand, and yet I knew that he was berating me for something. It didn't matter what, because a moment later, he set my head on a large stone, picked up another and swung.

I woke again, screaming this time, and Petra rushed into my room. I tried to tell her all of the nightmares, in order, but they were already beginning to slip away. All that remained were the terror, the pain, the fear; the sense of helpless paralysis and impending doom.

They came back every night after, always exactly the same. I began fighting sleep. Soon, I simply *couldn't* sleep. After the first week, I had to request a leave of absence. The exhaustion was consuming, the sleep medication from the doctor, debilitating. I had no energy or focus to play. Depression settled like a heavy, black cloak on my shoulders, and the helplessness stretched into the infinite. It seemed inevitable that I had ruined my probationary term, and any chance at tenure. I swore off horror movies and hoagies forever.

At the very depths of my pit of despair, the jangling of the phone was a physical blow. It turned out to be more of a mental blow, as it propelled me to action.

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“So you’re just going to fly off to Germany, to visit some scientist you’ve never met before?” Petra was staring at me with a combination of worry and exasperation.

“Yep.”

“Wow.” Her shoulders drooped as she slouched back into the corner of the sofa. “And you call *me* impulsive.”

“I can’t explain it. I just have to go.”

“Fine, but don’t expect me to dust all your other *creepery*. I’ll do the animal stuff, but if I’m not sure, I’m not touching it.”

I laughed. “You won’t have to touch any of it. I’m taking my entire collection with me. Mister von der Meier is eager to see every piece I own.”

Her sigh was mostly relief.

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Graf Tomas von der Meier was every inch the average looking, blue-eyed, dark-haired, middle-aged guy, who could hail from nearly anywhere on the planet, though the Graf in his name declared him a member of the nobility. It was only when he set to work on my collection that he became animated, like someone had suddenly found his electrical switch, and flipped it on.

With my permission, he separated my instruments into classifications according to their constructed materials. I was disappointed to learn that I’d been misled about some of the more expensive pieces. It wouldn’t be easy

to inform Petra that we had far more human bones in the house than we'd suspected.

When he had all but the pan-flute in their groupings, he held it up to the sunlight pouring in the windows. He'd been fascinated by the flute alone, but the fact that it would play for no one else whipped him into an eagerness akin to a child set loose in a toy store.

"Now where do you belong, mein freund? Tell me all of your secrets," he demanded as if it could simply answer all of our questions, right then.

Tomas and his wife, Jan, hosted me in their home, while he ran his various tests. By some miracle, I'd left the nightmares behind in America. Within a few days, I was feeling much more like myself, enough to begin to worry about the expense of this whole venture.

"Ach!" Tomas dismissed my concern with a flick of a hand. "I cannot charge you for this honour. Besides, we are cousins, of a sort, and I cannot charge family for satisfying my curiosity."

It turned out that Jan was an avid amateur genealogist, and she had traced my ancestry to a common root, many generations back. The von der Meiers took such things very seriously. It didn't mean so much to me—until the results of the tests revealed another, more disturbing link.



"You must play it for me!" Tomas demanded, a bit of lunatic light flashing in his eyes.

I thought to play *Scarborough Fair*. From the first exhale, I realized I was playing *Bridge Over Troubled Water*, instead. I closed my eyes as I played, and Tomas sang some words in German that I assumed were the translated lyrics—until I opened my eyes.

Tomas was sitting on the floor, his eyes larger than a frightened doe, and his hands over his mouth as tears streamed down his face. He lowered his hands and his mouth opened and closed several times without forming any words or sound.

“Tomas?” I asked, frightened by the balance of horror and joy in his expression.

“Es singt! It sings!” he finally managed to shout.

He leapt to his feet, and snatched the flute from my hands. Rushing over to his desk, he grabbed a handful of papers and waves them at me like a victory flag.

“*Der Singende Knochen!* You have found *The Singing Bones!* Do you know what this means?” He was practically screaming.

Jan appeared in the doorway, one hand over her mouth and the other over her heart.

“No. I don’t know what any of it means!”

Jan came over to sit in the chair Tomas had vacated. She smiled at me shyly, took both of my hands in hers and began to speak in careful English.

“You have found something magical and tragic, Cynthia. If you will listen with an open heart, I will tell you the story of it.”

I could only nod my consent, and she began.



“Many hundreds of years ago, when Germany was a feudal society, there was a King, Konig Berahtam, whose lands were ravaged by a wild boar. The boar had killed many men, and nearly killed the king himself. Believing that he would die from his wounds, and only having a daughter to succeed him, he promised her hand to any lord who could bring him the corpse of the boar.



“There was a...” she struggled for the English word, “a Duke, Herzon von Fulda, with two sons. The eldest, Emelrich, wanted the crown for himself, even knowing that the younger brother, Ortwin, truly loved the girl. They set off together to find the boar, but fell to arguing about who would get the girl. Ortwin wanted to take the corpse together and allow the princess to choose, but Emelrich would not agree. Finally, they chose to hunt separately and let destiny decide for them. Ortwin went straight into the forest, determined to win, but Emelrich stopped at a drinking house, to find his courage at the bottom of a mug.

“Just before he entered the forest, Ortwin saw a tiny man sitting on a rock, weeping. He asked the little man what his trouble was, and the man said he wept for the fate of the kingdom.

“When the little man learned that Ortwin sought to win the boar, the princess, and the kingdom, he danced for joy. Then he gave Ortwin a spear, long and strong.

““Keep the spear in your hands before you,” the dwarf said, “and let no one see your back until you’ve claimed your prize.”

“Ortwin tried to thank the man, but he vanished the moment the young noble touched the spear. It wasn’t long until he found the boar. The beast charged the man, but Ortwin remembered the words of his benefactor and kept the spear in front of him. The boar impaled itself on the spear.

“With the boar bled and hung around his neck, Ortwin trudged back toward the castle. He met his brother along the way, and remembering the little man’s warning, he decided that having Emerlich at his side would be prudent.

“As they walked, the elder brother became more and more jealous. When they came to a narrow bridge, Emerlich insisted that Ortwin go first, so he could watch his younger brother’s back.”

“But the warning was to let *no one* see his back!” I interrupted.

As Jan nodded, my heart began to pound and my stomach to fold in upon itself. My chest constricted, making it hard to draw a breath.

“Emerlich attacked his brother!” I hissed. “He hit him, and then stabbed him with the spear.”

Jan and Tomas stared at me in growing horror as I detailed the rest of my nightmares, but I could sense no disbelief.

When I had finished, Tomas pressed one hand to his chest, as if to keep his heart in place. Jan shuddered, one great physical motion that ran like a wave from her head to her feet.

“Emerlich took the boar to the konig and wed his daughter, becoming next in line for the throne. He told everyone that the boar must have killed Ortwin, as he had found it covered in blood already. For many years, the people believed him.

“To Emerlich’s dismay, Konig Berahttram recovered from his wounds. Emerlich chafed at having to wait for his kingdom, but he played the dutiful son-in-law. His own sons grew. One would be Konig after Emerlich, the second would be his...” she groped for the right word, “his chamberlain. The youngest boy, being a simpler man, became a musicker...a minstrel, and traveled the world.

“One day, when the youngest boy, Chlodovech, was returning home for a visit, he was crossing a bridge, and saw something gleaming white in the water below. He climbed down the bank to the stream, where he found seven bones.

“Chlodovech sat down upon the bank and carved the bones into a flute he had learned of in Griechenland.”

“The pan flute!” Tomas shouted, finding his voice again. “He named it *The Singing Bones*, because it sang to him when he played it. Not just an

instrument's voice, but it sang with a man's voice, Ortwin's voice."

"Chlodovech took his new instrument to the castle," Tomas took up the tale, "to play for the Konig, and when he played, the voice came forth with the same words you heard just now: ' Ach! Du liebes musicker, du blasen auf meinem knochen. Mein brüder mich erschlugen unter die brücke begruben, um das wilde schwein für die königs töchter.'"

"Oh, dear musician," Jan translated. "You are blowing on my bones. My brother struck me dead, and buried me beneath the bridge, to get the wild boar for the daughter of the king."

"Konig Berahthram heard these words, and Emerlich heard them. The elder brother knew he had been found out, and pleaded for his life. The king's daughter, however, was heartbroken. She had loved Ortwin, but never Emerlich.

"Ortwin's bones were retrieved, and the stream became a river again. The king had the elder brother tied up in a sack and drown in the river. Ortwin became a local Saint, and his bones were buried on holy ground, including the flute."



I stared at the flute in my hands, with a jumbled mixture of horror and wonder. I'd never believed in magic, or fairy tales. Now both lay in my lap, and everything I thought I knew had been turned on its head.

"So how did the flute end up in a drawer in an American flea market? How did it make its way to me, and finally to you, who are probably the only people on the planet who know its history?"

"We are not the only ones who know *The Singing Bones*," Jan nodded sagely. "The Brothers Grimm heard the tale many years ago, though they

believed it was a fairy story, and changed it somewhat before they gave it to the world.”

“And your government, or someone in it, knows the true story, as does ours.” Tomas added, putting a hand on the shoulder of his wife. She smiled at him sadly, over her shoulder, and covered his hand with her own.

“How...?” I couldn’t form the question clearly, but I didn’t have to.

Jan looked a question at Tomas, who nodded back with his lips drawn tight.

“A few times, the bones have been dug up,” Jan said, “stolen by grave robbers. Ortwin was stripped of all his finery the very first time, but the flute always makes its way home again. Somehow it always comes back to one of the descendants of Chlodovech.

“It is said that Emerlich’s eldest son, Gebahard, was much like his father, and planned to murder both of his brothers, for fear that they would try to depose him. Just as he made to execute his plans, though, the flute was returned to court, and Konig Gebahard begged his brother to play it for him before it was returned to rest.

“Chlodovech obliged, and the voice of Saint Ortwin sang out a warning, which saved the two younger brothers. The Konig was deposed and the second brother took the crown from his sons, cursing Gebahard and all of his descendants, and banishing them from the kingdom.”

“Since then,” Tomas continued, “any time one of Gebahard’s descendants tries to return to Deutschland, *The Singing Bones* return also. If the flute is played in their presence, and they are black of heart, the song of the flute will stop that heart from beating.”

“The pan flute *kills* people?” I shouted. I set it on the table beside me, suddenly eager to have it as far away as possible.

Jan nodded again. “The last descendent of Gebahard to hear the flute... was Adolf Hitler.”

I nearly fell out of the chair.

“You and I,” Tomas said, “are descendants of Clodovech. Last in our lines, actually. So far as we know, your government spirited the flute away after the last descendant played it. Whoever that was must have kept it, and taken it to America.

“It made its way back to you, and from you to me, here in Deutschland. The flute has come home.”

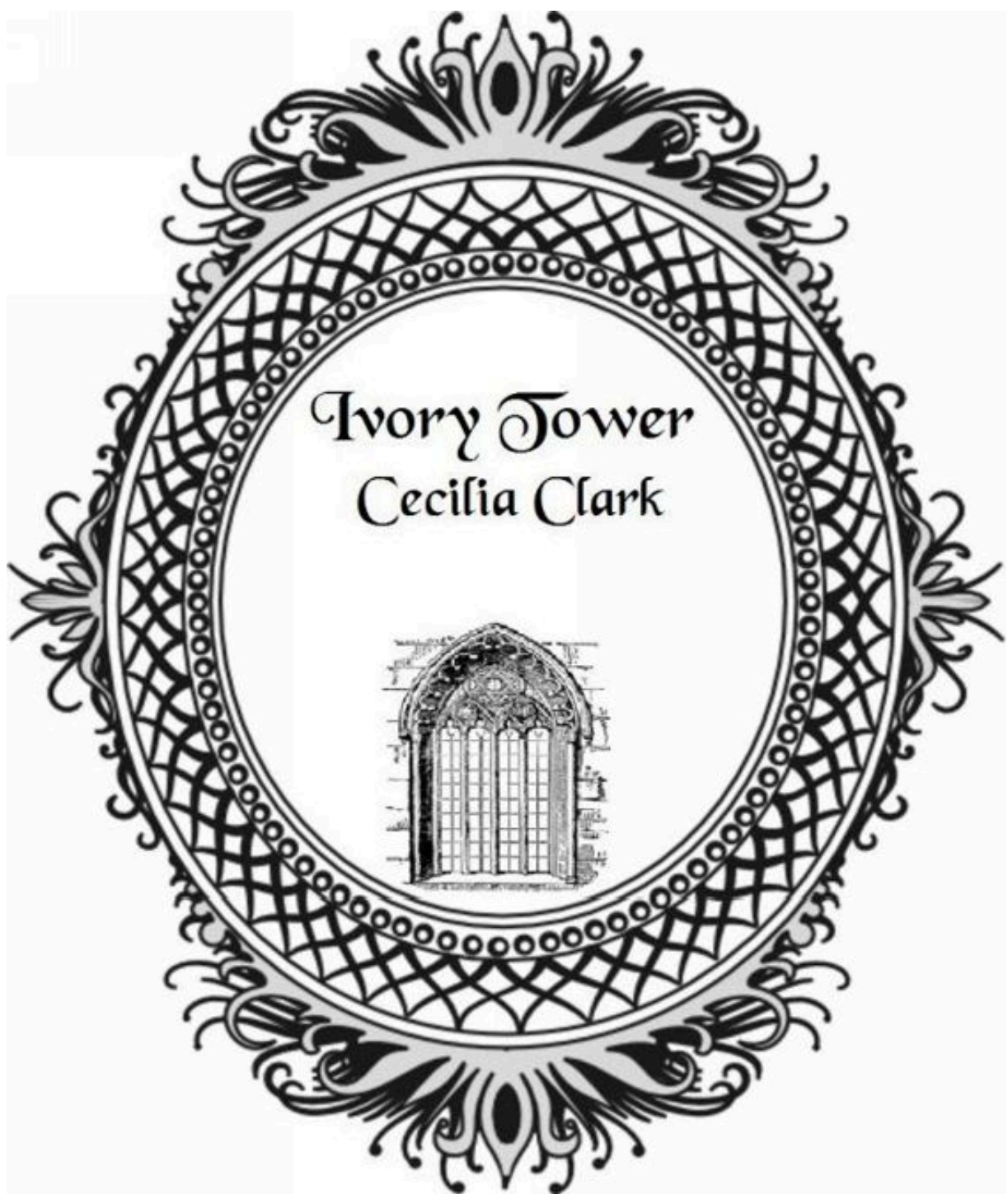
“But why?”

“That,” Tomas replied gravely, “is what we must determine. Has it returned to rest, or is another descendant of Gebahard here in Deutschland, planning some kind of evil?”

Tomas looked into my eyes then. I could see sadness, pity and hope in that stare.

“The flute will not play for me. You are the only one who can bring forth the voice of Saint Ortwin. Will you stay here in Deutschland, if it means saving our world from evil?”

In that moment, my life changed forever; all because I’d bought something for ten dollars, at a flea market.



# Ivory Tower

## **Cecilia Clark**

*\*This story written in UK English\**

The prince looked exhausted. Shadows circled his eyes, his skin was pale and sallow, his hands trembled slightly and his eyelids drooped.

“He needs a doctor.”

“He needs a man of God”

“Is he possessed?”

“Is he dying?”

The courtiers whispered amongst themselves—not so softly the prince could not hear. He turned his head and gazed unseeing out of the window near his seat. The court watched the prince lift himself wearily from his seat and shuffle from the room.

The king and queen called for their advisors. They suggested the prince should get out in the sun, spend less time indoors, read less, be more physical and go to church more often.

“Maybe it is time he chose a bride, your majesties,” advised the most sage of the learned men.

“Has anyone asked him what the matter is?” an elderly woman knitting in the corner made her soft voice heard over all the others. They all quieted and turned toward her. Her needles clicked loudly in the lull of other sounds. “There seems an awful lot of talking about instead of talking with.” Her attention returned to the thing she was knitting, and the others in the room looked across the council table at each other.

“I shall talk to him,” the king announced

The king, followed by the usual entourage, found his son in the prince’s favourite library chair. His head lolled to one side and soft snores emanated



from his pale lips. Exhaustion had etched the beginnings of early lines in the young man's soft cheeks.

The king felt loathe to wake him and shushed the entourage out of the library. He sat near his son and watched him sleep. Where was all the vitality he had shown just months ago. The dear sweet boy had given his father every reason to swell his chest with pride. Kind, loyal, affectionate and smart, the prince was everything a man could want in his only child.

The lad rode his horse with a fine seat and played the dulcimer with the hand of a bard; he could strategize better than the warlord and speak to every foreign diplomat in his or her own tongue. He was sensible in his cups, gambled only on a sure thing and was the best opponent in chess the king could desire. Yet, since his last birthday, the Prince had begun to decline, coming from his room later and later in the morning with his energies sapped. He no longer practiced at sword, nor rode his horse. He could barely drag his feet to come to the table, and when he did, he nibbled like a small bird.

“What ails you, lad, and how may I help? Are you possessed or haunted, ill or mad? Whatever it is, I must find a way to help you. What good is being a king, if I cannot heal my son?” The king rubbed his face with a gnarled hand and left the Prince asleep in the library.

The king had a guard placed at the door and spies to watch if the prince were climbing from the window and going out dancing all night, but the Prince stayed in his room from dusk until dawn.

“He does seem to be talking in his sleep a lot, your majesty.” The taller guard looked to the shorter for confirmation.

“Yes, and he does seem to be making a lot of noise, but it is muffled through these thick doors. There is no hint of light, so he is not reading, I would wager.”

The king had doctors and wise men take a look, they found the prince in reasonably good health, his wit intact, yet with an air of exhaustion as of one who had stayed up all night for many nights in a row. The prince stoically endured the pokes and prods, leeches and bleeding with a lethargy that appalled the physicians.

Religious people of all persuasions looked over his son.

“Possession by demons, madness and sin, the boy is in grave danger,” they howled and offered talismans and smoke, symbols and prayer, and hints for donations to the greater good of their Gods. The prince dutifully prayed, offered them gold coins for their troubles and gazed at each with the respect due their position, but his eyes were dull with fatigue.

Finally, the king called for a hedge witch and a horse doctor. They looked at each other and then at the prince. The horse doctor lifted the prince’s lip, looked at his teeth, asked him what he had been eating and if his bowels were working and tested muscle resilience and tendon flex.

The prince answered softly, each sentence pushed from him on a puff of tired air.

“Fine young specimen, but needs more sleep in the night hours.” The horse doctor nodded and chewed a piece of dried grass. “Tis important to sleep enough and set the body clock working with the sun and moon.”

The hedge witch looked at them all and shrugged. She peered closely at the prince.

“What do you do all night, My Lord, which has you so worn out? Has anyone bothered to ask you that?”

The king rubbed his chin and scratched at his salt and pepper beard. A frown grooved a furrow between his brows. The horse man nodded. The wise men and fools threw up their hands at such a ridiculously simple question.

“No one has asked, good woman, and though you have, I may not tell you,” the prince spoke respectfully in his soft dry weary voice. He turned to his father, the king, and bowed as was expected.

“Father, my king. I must go on a quest and ask your blessing and beg you not to ask me where, when or why.”

The king widened his eyes and his mouth formed an ‘o’ over a chin dropped low. His furry grey eyebrows wiggled under his crown, then dropped to their usual position shading his eyes. and the deepening furrow between them reasserted its usual place.

“Whatever you need, whatever you want. If it will help you, then so be it. Are you able to go on a quest?”

“I must.”



The girl gazed out of the tiny window, high in the wall of her bedroom, in the highest peak of the tower. The tower was her life. She could barely recall the time when she had not been in the tower, but the memories were fading into a dusty past. Dust was something she knew in theory, but it too was something from her long forgotten past.

The window framed a patch of azure with the tiniest brush of horse tail cloud. She checked the mitred corners of her bedspread as she did every morning, smoothed down her dress and left the bedroom to descend the spiral staircase all the way to the bottom, where the library was situated.

She did not eat breakfast. She supposed that it was to do with the tower, because she never ate anything. She did not hunger or thirst. She did not need to do anything to her body and had worn the same dress every day since she had come there. She brushed her hair in the morning, simply because it felt pleasant and was part of her entrenched routine.

Time was measured in books. The library housed one hundred and forty-three thousand and sixteen books. She had counted and read them all. She had written seven thousand stories of her own. She had studied the subjects from languages to mathematics to astronomy and everything else the books contained. She had cross referenced, made studious notes and critiqued works. The books had been her sanity.

In them, she had learned the geography and history of every country in the world outside her tower, but she was trapped in an eternal prison where even the books were not enough. How pointless to read of snow and never touch it or feel what cold meant. How pathetic to read of love as an intellectual concept only. She scoffed at romance, and threw the book of poetry across the room, but regretted it and smoothed the pages before replacing it in the shelf. She had cook books, but no need for food. She had books on mechanical things and inventions, but nothing to use as tools or materials. She only had herself, her bed, her one dress and the library, but she could not learn from the books why she was there, or when she had come, or who she was.

The window let her know it was day or night. She could not reach it to see more than the tops of a rugged mountain range and the sky—the ever changing sky. She had no candles or lanterns, so when the sun began to fade, she would make her way up the stairs to her bed, lay down to sleep and wake again when the sun turned the sky pink in the morning.

On the day she finished the one hundred and forty-three thousand sixteenth book, for the first time, she felt a strange tingling throughout her body. She carefully put the book in the shelf and began to ascend the stairs. Counting each one, as was her habit, she climbed in a distraction—forgetting to keep count after the third turn as she pondered this new

sensation. She lay on her bed and watched the last of the light fade from the patch of sky through her window.



She shivered in the cold night air. “Am I on a balcony? What a lovely view.” Lights twinkled in a dark city scape. The girl slipped inside the room through an enormous pair of open windows to seek warmth from the fire. The leaping flames and glowing embers filled her with delight.

“So that is what a crackling fire looks like, how beautiful.” She gazed into the flames and felt the warmth seep into her skin. After a few moments, her curiosity made her look around at the rest of the room. It was richly furnished in velvet and gilt. A large bed stood in the centre of the room, draped in velvet curtains. Pulling one aside, she peeped in to see a young man sleeping. A book he had been reading had fallen on his lap. She tried to pick it up, but her hand passed through it.

“Am I a ghost?” she cried in distress and stepped away from the bed, pressing her hands to her mouth.

The young man opened his eyes.

“Who is there?” he called and noticed the girl. “Who are you?”

“You can see me?” she said in wonder.

“Of course I can see you, what are you doing in my bed chamber?”

“Is that where I am? It is a very nice bed chamber. I do like the fire.” She drifted toward the fire again. She liked feeling the warmth. “I don’t think I am a ghost?” her wistful tone caught the young man’s attention.

“Tell me who you are and from whence you came? Please sit down.”

They sat on each side of the fire and, although she did not know where she was from or what her name was, he found that conversations with her were the liveliest and most enjoyable he had experienced. She knew a great

deal about historical places and kingdoms long gone, and he began to take great interest in a subject he had hitherto abhorred. As the night progressed, they spoke of a great many subjects until, finally—against his will—the young man fell asleep in his chair, just as the sky was turning from dove grey to delicate shell pink.

The girl woke in her room. The window framed a patch of azure with not a cloud. She mitred the corners of her bedspread, as she did every morning, smoothed down her dress and left the bedroom to descend the spiral staircase all the way to the bottom where the library was situated. The day seemed longer than it had before. She felt too restless to read or draw and paced up and down the stairs, checking the light in her bedroom window. At last, when the sun began to fade, she made her way up the stairs to her bed and lay down to sleep.

He was waiting on the balcony, and she stood in his room looking at him and the way the wind playfully flipped his glossy hair. He turned and saw her standing there.

“I thought you may not come. I thought I dreamed of you. Come sit by the fire. Do you play chess?”

She laughed and sat in the same chair as before, confessing she knew chess but had never played with someone else. They talked and played, and the prince drank a thick dark drink to help him stay awake. She could not move the chess pieces, so he would move them for her. Sometime she won, and sometime she didn't, and they found they were evenly matched. So they set a pattern.

Each night, she would arrive, stay with him and they would talk about the world and politics, the stars and life. They discovered her history and politics were a century old, and he would bring in modern tomes for her to read with him. She would explain the courts of old, and they would laugh

and compare the changes. They would paint and draw, with him doing the actual work and her giving suggestions, and laughing at the results. He would play his flute or lyre, and she would sing. They would compose love songs and laugh some more.

During the day, he could not stay awake in his classes and stopped going out. He slept later and later. Though he tried hard to meet his daytime obligations as a good Prince should, his steps grew weary and his eyes dull. Only at night, when she was there, did he feel truly alive.

“Where is your tower?” he asked her, “Do you remember anything from before you were there?”

Try as she might, she had no recollection, except that she never saw the sun through her window. One night, she recalled the name of a village, and they poured over maps until he discovered an ancient scroll in the library archives that showed a town of that name had once existed.

“There is only a very old forest there now. Maybe your tower is there?”

Always, he would fall asleep as the sun was rising, and she would be gone when he awoke. Always, she would wake in the tower, never tired, but more restless as the days passed.

“I cannot continue like this,” he said to her. “I am wearier by the day, and I grow weak and ill.”

She noted his hair had lost its gloss, and his eyes were not so bright. She felt something in her stir.

“I do not know what weary is, except this weariness of spirit, yearning to be free.”

“I will come and find you, and if you are not a ghost, I will bring you here so we can be together for ever.”

“Just together, not forever. I have forever already, and it is too long.” She sighed and looked out at the stars in their inky velvet bed.

“Let us talk of sweeter things.”

They used the telescope, gazed closely at the stars and they shared insights into the changing face of the constellations.



The prince set out on his epic quest with his man and several servants. They travelled light and made good speed through the Kingdom. The prince fell asleep in the saddle, and his man rode close to prevent falls, but the prince sat deep in the saddle, and the horse was intelligent enough to compensate. The entourage slept under the stars, while the prince gazed up, wide awake.

“Oh a forest, and a road, I thought never to know them for real.” She stood beside his bedroll and gazed up at the tree tops. He sat up and invited her to sit with him.

“Could we walk for a way? I have never been for a walk.”

They walked along the road, the way the prince had come, and talked of forests, plants, animals and dirt. There were so many things they wanted to talk to each other about, the world being so full of wonder and mystery.

“I should not stray far from my people.”

“No, you should not, Princeling.”

An ambush of brigands leaped out, and one tried to grab the girl. She screamed as his hands passed through her.

“Ghost? It’s a ghost.” Brigands are always superstitious, which caused them to flee.

The prince returned to the safety of his campsite, and they sat the night discussing if she were a ghost or no, and if superstitions were a safety reaction or irrational fear of the unknown. Finally, he lay back on his bedroll, and his eyelids closed of their own accord as the sky turned pink.



She opened her eyes and looked at the pink of the sky through her tower window.

“He comes.” She smiled and ran down the stairs without making her bed. The books held no lure for her, and she felt an unusual sensation in her abdomen. She rubbed it and wondered what might be the cause of such a feeling.

“Maybe I need to eat?” she found a book on digestion and pondered the possibility that the spell on the tower might be breaking.

That night they were by a lake and enjoyed the reflection of the moon on the rippled surface of the water. They saw a fish leap and splash, and she told him of her discovery.

“There was dust, and a page tore in a book. That has never happened before.”

“Is there a door in the tower?”

She shook her head.

“There has never been one.”

They stayed close to camp that night.

The Prince noted his usually alert guards slept as if enchanted, but did not chide them for it next day. They were alert, when he was not.

They entered the great forest and found the marker for the old village, three days in.

“There are old stories about these parts, my Prince.”

The prince’s man was not a teller of tall tales, so the prince listened respectfully.

“There was a mighty Baron who owned these lands, far and wide. He had a daughter as fair as the sunrise and a wife he loved with all his heart. A good man and fair, but his wife died, and he was bereft with grief.

“One day, he married again—in a politically adept move—and gained more power. The second wife died mysteriously, and soon he had married, maneuvered, and bullied his way into greater power, until he caught the attention of the king of the day.

“All of the other wives died in seemingly natural ways, but the king had some concerns that no man would have such great misfortune, and he sent his people to investigate. The Baron had killed them.

“The king sent word that he would marry the Baron’s daughter, so that they could have an alliance. The Baron flew into a fit of rage. His daughter was the image of his first wife, and he could not bear to lose her, so he hired the greatest magician of the era to build a tower to keep his daughter safe. The tower was built in the centre of the courtyard and the daughter was carried in while she slept. It had been furnished with everything a young girl could desire, except a way to leave.

“The Baron died in a skirmish later that year, and the magician—it is said—died of old age some decade later. Many tried to breach the tower, but to no avail. No axe or blade could penetrate it. There have been no magicians since. The people moved away. No one wanted to be near such an unlucky place. Finally, it was left to nature to take back, and now, it is nothing but old trees and rubble.”

“That is a fine tale, my man. Maybe we could find that tower. It seems a worthy quest.”

They rode on from the village marker and into thicker forest. It became so thick, they needed to dismount. The prince could not sleep when walking needed his attention. Soon, the forest was too thick for the horses, so they left them in a clearing with the servants.

The prince moved forward with his man and a few guards. He stumbled over a rock hidden amongst vines and realised he was in a ruin of some

sort. The trees were as close as fence posts, with shrubs and vines weaving a tight barrier between them. The Prince felt too weak to lift a sword and tried to cut the greenery with his hunting knife.

“Let me, my Lord.” The guard slashed the vines with a mighty swipe of his sword, and the group moved forward. The sounds in the forest were hushed. The trees thinned a little, and the prince noted rocks at their base, covered in moss and fungi.

“The courtyard perhaps?” He moved forward eagerly. He had not seen the girl for four nights, not since they had reached the village marker, and he was eager to find her.

The girl fell asleep and woke again in the morning. The room was cold. She felt an urgent pain in her lower abdomen, and discovered her body leaked fluids. She was frightened and realised she was feeling fear. She did not know what to do about the leaking fluids, so she read an anatomy tome, and realised it was a natural function she did not need to concern herself with. It would happen again, but her throat and mouth felt dry, and she had no water to replenish the liquid she leaked.

Her upper abdomen made noises and felt empty. She found herself wondering about the sensations and if he also felt these things. The tower felt cold and she sneezed, surprising herself with the noise and the experience.

“A sneeze must be experienced to truly appreciate it,” she said to herself and took up a few books to read about things she would experience as real not just as words. She brushed something off the page and looked at the fine particles on her hand. “Is this dust?”

She read and paced, eager to tell him about her new feelings. Yet, when she went to her room, it was too cold. She took the blanket back down to

the room with the books and curled in her chair to try and sleep. She shivered and sleep would not come.

“Can I light a fire?” She thought of the crackling blaze in the prince’s room and sought a book to tell her how. She found the information about flint and steel and felt defeat, as she had neither. She piled up books into a small castle, lay scrolls on the floor of it and put her blanket and herself inside to keep warm.

She woke in the morning and heard a bird call for the first time. She listened in fascination as birds sang to each other from outside her walls. Her body leaked again, and her throat felt dry and sore. She could not seem to get saliva to wet her tongue. Her head felt sore and fuzzy, but she had no energy to spare to explore these new sensations.

Her thirst grew desperate, and she thought about the window. Climbing the stairs felt difficult and her limbs weary; she had not slept long in the cold night and uncomfortable, makeshift bed. The window had droplets of water on it, but she could not reach, and the thirst tortured her. She lay on the bed and tried to sleep. She was too cold, and her throat hurt so much she could not shut her mind down. The night crawled by interminably.

She rolled off the bed when the sky lightened and trudged back down the stairs. She tripped on a loose board, tumbling the last few steps to the floor below. Her knees, hands and elbows had scrapes. She lay still and cried, leaking more water from her eyes. Her head pounded. She crawled into the book room and curled up on her scrolls. Her body had stopped leaking, but she was shivering uncontrollably. She pulled the blanket over herself, but it made no difference. She shut her eyes.

The prince and his man walked around the tower for the fourth time. “It is no good, my Lord, there are no entrances.” The guards lounged in a sunny spot in the clearest part of the courtyard.

“Perhaps there is a way in from under the tower? How would they have put the girl in the tower to begin with?” The prince had bounced back with energy to spare after four good nights of sleep.

“There will only be skeletons and spider webs in there, My Lord.” The manservant spread his hands in defeat.

“Think of the adventure, my man. Think of the hidden treasures. Think of the glory. Come on. let’s explore the older part of the building.” The prince slapped him heartily on the shoulder.

“It could be too dangerous, what if it collapses?”

“You sound like my old nursemaid, man.” The prince stabbed at the tower with his hunting knife, which slid through the mortar between the stones. “Look at that. Let’s dig. We can make a gap in the wall.”

The prince set to, eagerly chipping away the mortar and dragging out a stone. He called his men, and they all set to with enough vigour to shift a good size gap in the tower wall. Sunlight flooded into the space. The prince was halted from climbing through by his man.

“I’ll go first, my Lord, just to be on the safe side.”

The prince stepped aside a little ungraciously. He waited the length of three heartbeats and followed. Inside, the circular room smelled of urine and dusty books.

“How peculiar.”

Books lined the far wall from floor to ceiling in row on row, but the prince was eager to explore the tower and headed for the door. “Come on let’s find her.”

His man looked puzzled, but followed his prince into the stairwell.

“Mind the stairs my man, some have loose boards.” The sound of footsteps pounding up the stairwell could be heard echoing down the circular walls.

Inside her room, the prince stopped. The bed did not have mitred corners or a blanket on it. The room stank of strong urine and dark patches marked the floor.

“No!” he cried in anguish. “If time has returned, she has been locked in here for days with no water, and the nights have been so cold?” The prince hurtled back down the stairs, almost sending his man to his death. Both men steadied each other. “We have to find her, come let us return to the room of books.” The prince continued his headlong flight and ran to the bookshelves.

“Who are we finding, my Lord?” The puzzled manservant followed his lord.

Amongst the scrolls, her lips blue and cracked, her cheeks sunken, her heart beat a rapid flutter, the prince gazed down upon her.

“Water, fetch my bottle urgently.”

The manservant scrambled back through the hole in the wall and returned promptly. The prince unstopped it and tilted the bottle.

“Slowly, my Lord, or she will be ill.”

“She will need food and some fresh clothing. Mine will suffice.” The water fell in single droplets onto her mouth. He slid a finger past her lips to part them and poured a little more water onto her tongue. Her breath reeked of near death. She swallowed and gasped. He held her arms back from clutching at the bottle and dripped a little on her crusted eyelids and more drops in her mouth.

“Slowly, slowly or you will be ill,” he crooned softly to her.

“More,” she croaked, and he let her have some more. She swallowed again and again. He stopped.

“More,” she croaked again.

“Not yet, my Lady.” He held the bottle out of reach. “Let your stomach settle.”

She whimpered, and his heart ached at the sound, but he forced himself to wait.

“Here you go,” he crooned gently and lifted her up to a sitting position. He held the bottle to her mouth and let her take a large gulp of water, then lay her back down. He lifted her feet and placed books under them to keep them elevated.

The manservant returned with clothes and food.

“My Lord, the men are wary of this place, they fear enchantments and ancient evil.”

“My fear, good man, is that we almost came too late. One more day, and this young lady would have been beyond my reach. The enchantment has ended, the tower is breached. Leave me to assist her as a ladies maid should. Bring me warm water, if you would be so kind. I will wash and dress her, so we may travel home. Tell our people they have nothing to fear.”

The prince held his lady, gently washed and carefully dressed, close to his chest and smoothed back her hair. She took small sips of water, and they rested for the night.

“You found me,” she said in awe. “I thought dark things, and I felt despair.”

“I said I would,” his voice held a promise kept. “We have no need to fear.”

They watched the fire the servants set and ate a simple meal. The flames danced high, flickering golden light in their eyes. They held each other close and slept.



The prince looked exhausted. Shadows circled his eyes, skin pale and sallow, his hands trembled slightly and his eyelids drooped.

“She is too old.”

“She is too common.”

“Her father was an enemy of the king?”

“She may still be tainted?”

The courtiers whispered amongst themselves, not so softly the prince could not hear. He turned his head and gazed unseeing out of the window near his seat.

The king and queen called for their advisors. They advised the prince should not marry the girl from the tower, he should spend more time with debutantes more suited to his station, the girl should go to a cloister, her lineage was not suitable and many other things more negative than the last.

“Has anyone asked him what he wants?” an elderly woman knitting in the corner made her soft voice heard over all the others. They all quieted and turned toward her. Her needles clicked loud in the lull of other sounds. “There seems an awful lot of talking about, instead of talking with.” Her attention returned to the thing she was knitting, and the others in the room looked across the council table at each other.

“I want happily ever after, and I can only have it with her,” the prince declared emphatically.

“Have you asked her if that is what she wants?” The knitting paused.

“I am a fool.”

“You are a fool! Though, even fools can learn.” The needles resumed their rhythmic click.

The prince sought his lady in the room of his tower they had reserved for her alone.



“You ask me to exchange one tower for another. My father locked me up in some crazy fit of grief. He stole my life, my time and my home so long ago I can’t recall, and here you are demanding the very same conditions. To live above the world and not be in it, I think not. You are my dearest, only friend, you are my first true love.” She touched one cheek tenderly and kissed the other soft and warm. “Not e’en for you, and never more, will I live in an ivory tower. Happy ever after is not a place I want to be, it is far too simplistic and limited in scope, and I have a world to explore.”

The prince felt his heart constrict in pain, but he was a man trained to a role. He knew, though he could coerce her to stay, he had no right to hold her against her will. He bowed deeply and kissed her hand.

“Fare well, my Lady. You will be ever in my heart.”

“Fare well, my Prince. You will ever hold a place in mine.”

With that, they parted, and their lives were never the same, because life has a way of being an adventure—no matter what height you view it from.

The  
Innkeeper's Daughter  
Andrea L. Staum



# **The Innkeeper's Daughter**

**Andrea L. Staum**

The modest inn, with its two stall stable, was nestled deep in the forests. All roads led to it like the spokes of a wheel to the center hub; however, very few made the journey down the darkened trails. Those who did, wanted to hurry to their destination, only stopping for a brief repose in the damp common room of the inn or to water their horses. Still, the innkeeper kept his doors open to those few weary travelers wishing a bed for the night. With his wife as the cook, his daughter, Ararinda, to tend the hens and small vegetable patch, the innkeeper was content. He rarely traveled farther than the wooden fence that lined his property and warned his women to never venture farther than the stream just beyond.

Ara grew up unaware of the world beyond the trees. She rarely spoke to those travelers that stopped. There was a fat monk that came at least twice a year. He laughed, drank with her father and had tried a couple times to bring her to his god, but when his hands wandered low on Ararinda's back in front of her mother, she was sent to her room in to avoid him. Occasionally, a caravan of traders came from the south would exchange new cloth and rare spices for a warm bed.

The traders were her mother's favorites, and Ararinda had caught the caravan leader and her mother behind the stable a couple of times. After a few strong lashes, she knew better than to mention it to her father. Then again, her father was not innocent of dalliance. A fine lady had come through with her guard and servants, and Ara had stumbled upon her father, braying like a goat, atop a handmaiden.

Regardless, Ararinda grew up naïve of her own beauty. She wore only the handmade dresses her mother made her, and they were usually some

shade of brown or gray. Once, she had been fortunate and received a bright yellow one, but had soiled it cleaning the stables. She only saw her black ringlets once a month, falling to the floor when her mother took a straight razor to her head.

“Why can’t I grow it long like you, Mama? Why can’t I braid it like you?” Ara pleaded with each scrape of the blade.

“Because only a married woman can have long hair,” her mother replied.

“But some of the trader girls have long hair, and they’re younger than I am. Do they have husbands?” She tried to turn her head to see her mother, but her mother’s firm hands forced her to look forward once more.

Her father had come in as she had asked the question and responded when her mother remained silent. “They do not have to clean out chicken coops and horse stalls or milk the goat. It’s a curse having long hair, child. This keeps it from getting in your way while you work.”

“I don’t see what husband would want me with a prickly head,” muttered Ararinda resentfully as she looked down so the blade could cut the hair near the base of her skull.

To keep her modest, her parents kept her away from anything that could show her reflection. Ara’s mother had hidden the one mirror she had possessed in a small cupboard beside her bed, which was turned so the drawer faced the wall, making it hard for Ararinda to open and sneak a peek at herself.

She had tried getting into the drawer once, when her curiosity had gotten the better of her, but her father had caught her. He had reaffirmed the rule of not looking with the lash of his belt, and she had never tried again. Anything else shiny enough to show the girl her reflection was quickly scuffed or tarnished when it came into the inn.

Even the traders knew better than to show her anything metallic. One time, when she had been no taller than an ax handle, a crooked-tooth trader had given her a silver bauble. For a few breaths, she had gazed into her own distorted blue eyes. The leader of the caravan, seeing this, had slapped the object from her hands. It had rolled beneath the hooves of one of the horses, where it was crushed to a thousand slivers and disappeared into the mud.

That night had been the first in which the voice stole into her dreams. “Come to me, Ararinda,” the whisper had compelled.

She had awakened, shivering, and had closed the shutters, despite the warmth of the summer night. She had rested her head against the dry, paint-flaking wood and had waited for her heart to slow. When the pounding had stopped flooding her ears, she heard a scrape against the floor behind her. She had turned quickly. Her eyes had been slow to adjust to the waking world, but a faint, golden glow seemed to come from the far corner of the room.

Ararinda blinked, and the light had disappeared. She had realized the sound must have come from her parents’ room next door, where she could hear the familiar sound of their coupling.

She had returned to her bed, convincing herself it had been some outside light that had filtered through the shutter. Burying her head under her husk filled pillow, Ara had slowed her breathing and soon slept once more. By morning, thoughts of the voice had fallen deep in her memory as her daily tasks took over.

Seasons passed faster than the travelers did, and Ararinda soon found herself longing to see where the roads could take her. She listened intently to every story the travelers told, imagining the grand cities and towns that were beyond the trees. Even those brief moments of escape were taken away when her mother set her to chores to keep her busy and away from

any guests. Ara began to wonder if all her days would be wasted in the tiny place, secluded from the world. Her parents continued to keep the boundaries between the road and the creek firm, despite her every protest.

“How will I find a husband of my own?” she whined to her mother once after a bride and groom had come through on their way to one of the grand cities. Ararinda realized that her parents would have to let her go if a man were to claim her for his bride. The problem was, those travelers that came, knew her, and even the younger traders knew better than to try for her attentions.

Her tired mother shook her head and kept kneading the bread dough. “He’ll come for you soon enough. Trust in that, child, just don’t wish for it.”

Ararinda rolled her eyes and took up the slop bucket. A traveler had given them a pig for payment, and the innkeeper had decided to fatten it on table scraps, in hopes of feasting on it when the next wealthy customer graced them with his or her presence. That had been nearly three seasons before, and the poor creature could barely roll over, much less stand. Still, Ara made sure it was well tended.

As she was going to the makeshift pen, the hog snorted and grumbled. Its snout wiggling impatiently as it caught the scent of food, it became more anxious and more active than it had been at any point since it had come to the inn. It began to push against the wood, and Ara cringed at the sound of the splintering, dropped the bucket and tried to push the beast back. It forced itself against the fence until the dried wood gave up beneath the weight and toppled over, covering Ararinda in a disgusting mixture of mud and filth.

Her father was quick to her side, helping her pen the beast once more. Once the pig was contentedly rooting through its dinner, he saw the state

Ara had been left in. “Go wash in the stream,” he ordered, his finger pointing to the running water that bordered her world.

Ararinda rinsed her hands in the horse trough before taking a clean dress from the drying line and making her way to the stream. The air was cold, and goose pimples rose from her arms at the thought of the quick running water rushing over her skin. She knew there was a pool not too far downstream, but it was actually beyond the boundary fence, and she had never gone to it.

*Mother and Father sneak to it, so it must be safe enough*, she thought. It would be far better to plunge into the deeper water and be rid of the grime quickly than to scrub at it in ankle deep water.

Ararinda placed her clean dress over the fence post and untied the belt of her soiled dress before pulling it over her head. She cringed as globs of mud streaked her face. She quickly tossed it into the water, where it floated a moment, until the water soaked into the material and it sank, the hem of the skirt still floating. She looked at it a moment before securing it in place with a rock. The gentle current wouldn’t rush it away, but it would clean the muck. Satisfied, she ran to where the pool was hidden.

When she reached the end of the fence, her steps faltered. One more step, and she would have gone farther than she ever had gone. The trees didn’t appear to be any different beyond that one step, but the sight of them made her palms sweat, and she almost took a step back. She bit at her lower lip, worrying the soft flesh between her teeth as she looked at the clearing that surrounded the pool.

The sun was well past that part of the tree canopy, making the pool black in the shadow the old trees. The bushes on the far edge moved, and she shrank back, grasping the fence post, but had to laugh at her

childishness when a rabbit hopped out to drink from the pool. It paused when it saw her, and retreated to its hiding spot.

Some mud slid from her cheek and down her neck, reminding her of why she was breaking her boundaries. She shook off the ominous feeling and took the step. *The pool is only a few paces away, what harm could come to me?* Ara wondered. *Mama and Father will never even know.*

When she came to the pool, the eagerness that had come with thinking she was doing something naughty ebbed. Ararinda looked around, suddenly shy about her nakedness and was quick to slide into the cool water. She dunked her head under and scrubbed at her arms. rough in the process, red lines formed along her arms as she scraped away the dirt with her fingernails.

The brush around the pool seemed to quiver in her peripheral vision as she cleaned herself. She paused to look around her, staring into the foliage. As she gaped, everything in the woods seemed to stop. Even the birds silenced their songs as she looked for what had caused her unease. She started to move toward the far edge, hoping it was just the rabbit, but the knot of fear in the pit of her stomach made her believe it was something larger.

“Ararinda!” she heard her mother calling for her from the inn.

Scrambling out of the water, Ara was anxious that she had tarried too long and would be caught outside of the safe area. She hurried into the clean dress that remained on the fence, but when she looked for the one she had left to wash, it was no longer there. The stone she had put on it was in place, but the dress was gone. She knew it had not floated downstream, or she would have seen it while in the pool. Ara worried her mother had gathered it up while looking for her, and she would be caught.



When she got back to the kitchen, her mother said nothing about the dress.

When the family sat down for supper, her father said nothing about it either.

She didn't dare bring it up herself and excused herself to her room very early that night. She stared out the window at the stream that twinkled in the starlight. A flutter caught her eye toward the top of trees. Ara squinted at it, and her eyes widened as she saw it was her dress blowing in the breeze. How it had gotten so high, she could not say, but it frightened her. The stomach knot she had felt in the pool returned, heavier, as she watched the skirt dance on the light breeze of the night.

She slammed the shutters harder than intended and buried herself in her covers.

"It's almost time." The voice came to her that night for the first time since she had been a little girl. "You will come to me, Ararinda. I grow impatient," it rasped.

As she had before, she pulled her pillow over her head. However, sleep did not return. The voice had seemed so close. When the dawn broke, she had to force herself from her bed. She spent the day in a trance, doing her chores, taking her meals with red rimmed eyes and a yawn not far from her lips.

"What is it girl?" her father asked, the corners of his eyes crinkled with concern, but the edge of his mouth drawn tight in aggravation.

"Did we have a guest come late?" she asked. "I thought I heard talking in the middle of the night."

Her father seemed to pale at the suggestion, and her mother gave a whimper from the kitchen. Still, both her parents denied a guest coming in the night.

As the weeks passed, the voice became very familiar as he called to her each night.

When her sixteenth birthday came, dreams began to accompany the voice:

She was alone—always alone. She seemed to start at the doorstep of the inn, but the walls were crumbling in, and the surrounding forest was long-dead. Ara found herself forcing her way down unfamiliar paths, overgrown from lack of use, searching for the speaker. When the wind blew, the call would come, and she would force her way past—grabbing branches and snagging thorns, always trying to find the source. Her bare feet bled against the cold and rocky soil the farther she went.

She would come to the edge of the forest and stare into emptiness. There was nothing beyond the woods. The cities and towns the travelers had told her about did not exist, except as decrepit piles of rubble, and beyond those was only empty blackness. Usually, she woke in a panic, gripping sweat soaked sheets when she realized that all her hopes for a life beyond the inn were pointless.

The night of her seventeenth birthday, she willed herself forward, seduced by the speaker to find him in the darkness. The wind had stopped, but the voice came again, different that time, kinder than it had ever sounded to her ears. “So close, Ararinda, so close. Just a few more steps.”

Her head snapped as she was yanked back to the fence and a hand struck her hard across the face, waking her. Her father had hold of her, looking at her with wide eyed panic. Looking around, Ara saw she was at the edge of the stream, almost to the hidden pool.

“How did I get here?” she asked, her gaze darting around the dark clearing.

Her father did not respond as he led her back to her room, put her to bed, and bolted the door from the outside. She could hear whispered conversation on the other side, but even with her ear pressed against the aged wood, she could not make out what her parents were saying. She vowed to ask them in the morning and began to stand up from her crouch near the door.

Arms wrapped around her from behind, and she tried to scream, her voice failing as the air was forced from her lungs by the embrace. She tried twisting around to see the attacker, but bony arms pinned her against his emaciated body.

“At last you’ve come,” he whispered into her ear. The chill of his breath startled her, and he snickered. The vibrations from his chest sent a shiver through her body, and she tried again to push away. “No, my Ararinda, you came willingly.”

Her voice quivered, “This isn’t real.”

Another laugh came as he turned her to face him. No light broke the black expanse around them that was her bedroom, but his eyes shined down at her as twin golden orbs, the same soft light she had once dismissed as moonlight through her shutters. The glow was not enough to distinguish his features, but it was enough for her to be caught in his gaze. Ara felt herself grow weak to the point of swooning, and he lowered her to the ground. The intensity in his eyes grew as he did, and she could see the glint from his wide, toothy smile.

She could hear her parents trying to unbolt the door and their shouts for her to open it. When both efforts failed, she saw the door bend against her father’s weight. After a few curses, he seemed to give up, and the only sound that Ara could hear from beyond her room was her mother’s sobs.

“Who are you?” she gasped as his hand followed the contour of her body, sliding the hem of her nightgown up her leg. Ara tried to force him away, but pulled her hand away once she touched the repulsive feel of his leathery skin.

“I am called The Hunter,” he whispered as his other hand slid up her back, his jagged nails catching in the rough fabric.

He pulled Ara closer, cradling her against his emaciated body, head resting against the sharp ridge of his collar bone. If she hadn’t felt his hand, she would have thought he wore a thin leather vest. When he shifted, she heard the bones creak and pop as the skin pulled beneath her cheek. He removed his hand from Ara’s thigh and roughly gripped her chin, forcing her to meet his gaze, the brightness nearly blinding her.

She tried to close her eyes to the golden glow, but found herself peering through her long eyelashes. She saw him gazing down on her as he straddled her body, his slender arms pinning her to the floor. He leaned over her and kissed first her collar bone, then her neck, before coming to her lips. The dry brittleness of his mouth against her skin appalled her, but the touch against such sensitive areas that had never been touched by another confused the girl.

Ararinda tried to turn away, her mouth opening to scream. He took advantage, his tongue slipping in, brushing against hers, and she felt a draining sensation go through her. The longer he held her kiss, the warmer it became to her, and the more she felt herself shrink as his body grew heavier atop of her.

The room was bathed in a soft glow. Ara realized the light was sourced by her own eyes. The Hunter stared wide-eyed down at her, and she saw her own sunken face reflected in the darkness of his pupils. His body had filled with her essence, but the sharpness hadn’t left his features. He pulled back,

his full lips parted in a satisfied grin. She craved his warmth as her body became cold. She reached for him as he stood, a whimper escaping her cracked lips.

Whatever the creature had been when it had entered her room, it was gone. The man before her was young and unlike any man she had seen before. Even with the gold glimmer that tainted her vision, she saw his dark chestnut hair falling to his squared shoulders. His full lips curled, and his sharp nose wrinkled in revulsion as he looked at her. He shook his head and laughed when another thud sounded from her door, her father's attempts at forcing it had begun again.

The Hunter waited for another three thuds before opening the door and letting her parents see her. "You broke your promises," he chastised them.

Her mother shook her head emphatically. "No! We did as you said. We raised her as you asked. She is a good girl."

"You allowed her innocence to be spoiled. You," he sneered, pointing first at her mother, and then her father, "and you, took whatever traveler you desired like rutting dogs and allowed her to see it. You did not stop the monk from fondling her young body."

Ara's father puffed his chest at the insult and stepped forward in protest. "We put an end to it when we found out and never allowed it to happen again."

The Hunter shook his head. "It never should have happened in the first place."

"She is a good girl," her mother whimpered again.

"She has viewed her own image, and she has broken the boundaries you laid. She could not resist the call. A 'good girl' wouldn't have done that," he replied with a bitter laugh. He took a step toward the door and her parents shrank away. "I told you to raise a pure bride and good fortune would come

to you. You have failed. Now you can stay here in this sad, little inn and tend to those few who come, knowing you could have been great.”

Ararinda looked at her withered hand. The light of the candle in her mother’s lantern hurt her eyes, and she hid her face from it. She didn’t need a mirror or anything else to know she was more decrepit than the Hunter had been when he had come to her.

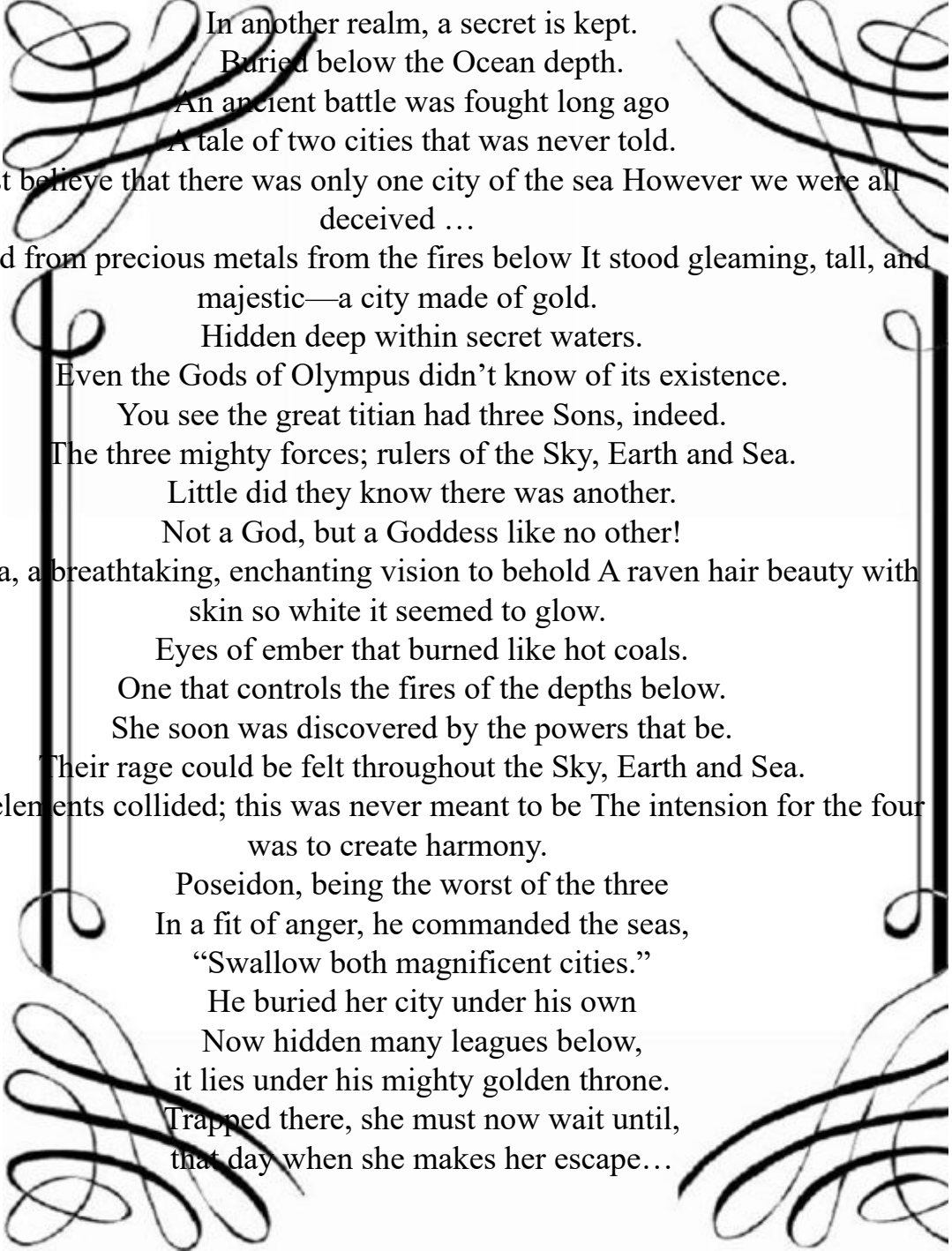
Her father’s stare had not left her. He barely acknowledged the Hunter’s words or bothered to comfort her wailing mother. Even when he was pushed aside for the Hunter to leave, he didn’t look away.

Before the strange man could leave, he found his voice and asked, “What should be done with that thing?”

A sudden rage filled Ararinda as her father pointed at her and referred to her as a ‘thing.’ An inhuman growl escaped her thin lips, cutting off her mother’s sobs, turning into a pitiful whimper.

The Hunter stopped in the doorway and looked over his shoulder, bowing his head to Ara, a cruel smile playing his lips, before taking his leave of them. “Hunt the darkness, Ararinda.”

# Hidden City of the Sea Jeanette Joyal



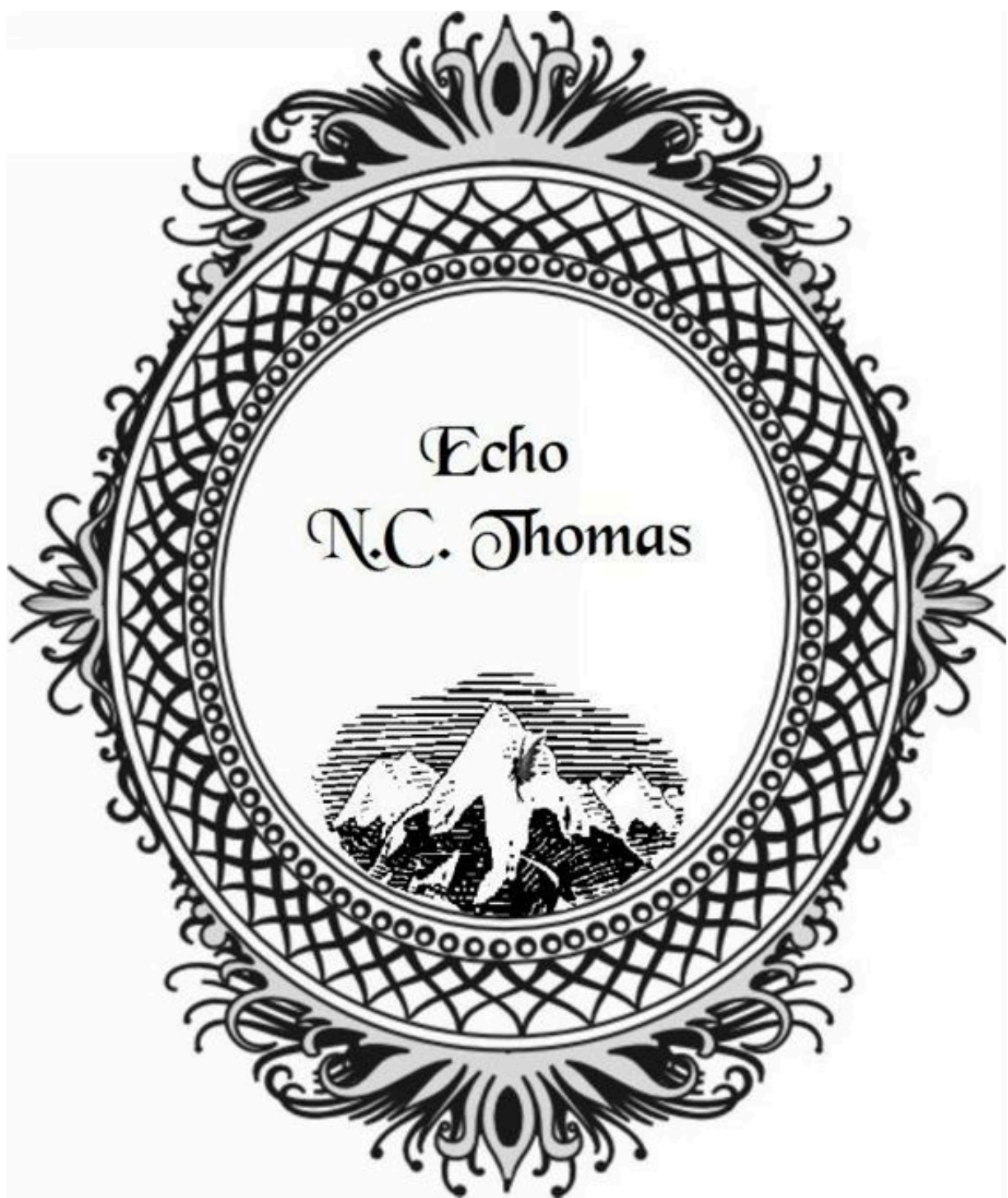
In another realm, a secret is kept.  
Buried below the Ocean depth.  
An ancient battle was fought long ago  
A tale of two cities that was never told.  
Most believe that there was only one city of the sea  
However we were all  
deceived ...  
Molded from precious metals from the fires below  
It stood gleaming, tall, and  
majestic—a city made of gold.  
Hidden deep within secret waters.  
Even the Gods of Olympus didn't know of its existence.  
You see the great titan had three Sons, indeed.  
The three mighty forces; rulers of the Sky, Earth and Sea.  
Little did they know there was another.  
Not a God, but a Goddess like no other!  
Aliana, a breathtaking, enchanting vision to behold  
A raven hair beauty with  
skin so white it seemed to glow.  
Eyes of ember that burned like hot coals.  
One that controls the fires of the depths below.  
She soon was discovered by the powers that be.  
Their rage could be felt throughout the Sky, Earth and Sea.  
Four elements collided; this was never meant to be  
The intension for the four  
was to create harmony.  
Poseidon, being the worst of the three  
In a fit of anger, he commanded the seas,  
“Swallow both magnificent cities.”  
He buried her city under his own  
Now hidden many leagues below,  
it lies under his mighty golden throne.  
Trapped there, she must now wait until,  
that day when she makes her escape...



# **A Pleasant Surprise**

**Nicole Daffurn**





# Echo

*\*This story is written in UK English\**

## NC Thomas

Echo listens to the soft crunch of the freshly fallen leaves under her feet as she wills herself to the edge of her forest at the base of Mount Olympus. Though she knows the forest as her only home, she never tires of it. She is a Dryad, a woodland Nymph, born from the roots of a tree. The forest is not just her home, but her life force. It is the mountain, with its sharp rocks digging into her soft feet and making them bleed, that fills her heart with sorrow. Oriads are the Nymphs of the mountains, but they do not reside on Mount Olympus. The Gods have claimed the rock as their own.

The cold air of the mountain makes its presence known on the edge of the forest, and soon, she reaches its foot. Stopping for a moment, as she always does when she comes to this point, she sighs. She remembers the day she became bound to this obligation. It is an invisible chain around her neck, and each time the chain seems to become heavier.



Since the forest had sprouted to life, men had wandered in, looking for proof of the legend of the Nymphs. This discovery had brought both joy and sorrow. Nymphs were beautiful in the stories and reality, and it was a blessed curse. The men received their carnal pleasures, and what once had been a curiosity, became obsession. Until the forest took their soul and poured it into the river that gave it life.

The man who came that fateful day looked no different than any other, except he appeared to be much older than the men Echo was used to. It was not wisdom brought on by age that made this so, but rather, the journey was too much for those who had seen more years than most. It made no matter to the Dryads—human bodies aged, but their souls never did. The man told

them he was fleeing his wife; that his old ears could no longer listen to her incessant nagging about his comings and goings. Echo felt a twinge of pity for the man and listened to his woes as her kin attended to his needs. For an old man, his appetite was large and he kept going through the night—sometimes with more than three Nymphs at a time. Echo still thought nothing of it.

*He has probably been starved of any affection by his wife for some time, she thought. Besides he is old, why shouldn't he go with ecstasy running through his veins?*

Once he had finally been sated, he asked Echo to sit with him and tell him tales of the forest. She gladly did, never tiring of her home. He spoke little, except to tell her, as so many had before, that her voice was like the tinkling of bells, a sweet music to his ears. Then the footsteps came crashing down on the forest floor like thunder.

“My wife!” the man said with panic in his eyes. “She has found me. Please, you must help me!”

“How?” Echo asked.

“With your voice,” was his response.

Echo agreed, not knowing how much it was to her and the other Nymph's detriment. She followed the sound of the footsteps warily. Nymphs didn't usually show themselves to women; they had no need to. However, not only did Echo want to help the old man; she wanted to see the face of the woman whose anger could be felt in the soil. When she came face to face with her, Echo held her breath in surprise.

She had expected an old crone of a woman: aged, ugly and stooped. Instead, she faced a woman of exquisite beauty, with large, dark, oval eyes, large lashes that reached her brow, and milky white skin. Her black hair moved as if a gale wind rushed through the forest, but the air was quite still.

Echo fulfilled her promise and distracted the woman with tales of the forest until she was calm again.

As the woman made to leave, she turned to Echo. “Yours is a voice that soothes. My husband and my responsibilities give me nothing but grief. I shall speak with you again.”

Echo said nothing, a rare occurrence for her, as she was so very fond of speaking. She did not want to agree and willingly welcome a woman into a forest that only looked to entertain men. Her silence seemed to speak volumes and that angered the woman.

With a thunderous look in her eyes, her voice filled the silent forest when she exclaimed, “Do you know who I am child? Do you know who my husband is? I am the daughter of Cronos and Rhea, mother of war, sister and wife to the supreme God Zeus. When I ask a question it is answered.”

Sorrow and dread suddenly filled Echo’s heart, and the forest seemed to quiver in fear upon the realisation of what had entered it. The woman was not a woman, but a Goddess from Olympus. Not only a Goddess, but Hera, the Queen of the Gods and patroness of marriage and fidelity. She was known for her jealousy and vicious nature, which drove towards a never-ending lineage of revenge. It could only mean the old man, who Echo had welcomed and the Nymphs of the forest had pleased, was none other than Zeus, supreme ruler of Olympus.

Echo could do nothing but agree to the demands of the deity. Hearing what she wanted, Hera left and Echo returned from whence she came upon first hearing the footsteps. The old man had disappeared, and instead, there stood a mighty figure with an aura of blue that seemed to crackle.

“You must leave this forest, King Zeus, and never return,” Echo declared. “Your lies and deceit have brought danger to us all.”

“I shall leave,” Zeus solemnly replied, but a menacing look crossed his face as he added, “but I will return.”

“You are not welcome.”

“The forest does not refuse any man.”

“But you are not a man, you are a God, and a God with a vengeful wife known for hating my kind who serve the pleasures of man.”

Zeus smiled. “And what would my vengeful wife do when she finds out that, not only did I have all of your kind in one night, but that you also tricked her with your voice?”

Echo stood rigid in shock at the realisation of what he was saying.

“Hera knows of all my infidelities, and still welcomes me back with open arms of forgiveness each time. Yes, there is a period where her hate runs so cold that I sometimes wonder who the supreme God is, but time means nothing to Immortals. We know eternity together means so much more than a fleeting moment with a lesser creature.”

And that was how Echo ended up climbing the craggy rocks of Mount Olympus over and over to distract Hera while Zeus had his way with the Nymphs—without ever having to pay the forest back. Time passed and seasons changed, but still he didn’t tire. Like all other males, he became obsessed with the Nymphs, but they couldn’t bring an end to it. The forest began to wither, and the legend of the Nymphs slowly became only legend. Men were able to pass through without ever looking upon one of the woodland sirens, who were always attending to Zeus or exhausted from it. There were times Echo would begin the climb, resolving to tell Hera of the trickery and falsehood of her visits. However, once she reached the top, she was once again fearful of what would happen to her kin and the forest, and thought better of it.

She reaches the peak and stops for breath. Her feet are blistered and cracked, with ripped and torn toenails. She dares not put her feet into the healing waters of the forest river, for fear that she will take any of the energy from it. The other Nymphs who Zeus uses, no longer bathe in it either, even though they are sore and raw from the physical violations. Echo, with her sweet voice, is the only one who lifts their spirits, telling them their suffering is worth the saving of the forest, and Hera's wrath will be much worse if she finds out.

The top of the mountain is shrouded in thick clouds that make it impossible to even see her hand in front of her face. These clouds serve as the gates of Olympus and will only disperse when the Horae, daughters of Zeus, deem she can enter. Echo waits as she always does, for the collective voice of the Horae, who always speak in chorus.

She waits and waits, but still the voices don't come. Echo calls out into the thick mist of clouds, "I am here to speak with Hera." The silence is deafening. Echo, lover of words, finds that silence seems to say more than speech. In her heart, she knows something is terribly wrong.

Her descent down the mountain seems longer and more painful than the climb up. She screams aloud in pain as the rocks dig into the raw cuts on her feet. When she nears the bottom, she leaps off to land on the soft grass at the edge of the forest, unable to take the pain any longer. When her feet touch her home, she feels its tremors vibrate through her feet and legs. The forest is fearful.

She feels a presence waiting in the trees, one she knows all too well, but wishes she didn't. She could walk the other way—around the mountain to another forest, or perhaps to the sea where she could join the Nereids—the

sea-nymphs. But her place is here, in the forest, which she knows as her home. She can't abandon that which she has risked everything to keep safe.

She makes to walk amongst the trees, when Hera appears at the edge.

Terrifying and beautiful at the same time, her eyes hold storms that are waiting to be unleashed. "And now I know the truth, grass wench. Now I know why you visit me with your voice of liquid silver and tales of your wretched and adulterous forest."

Echo, like the first time she met the Queen of the Gods, is unable to speak. However, it is not for want of speech. She wants to tell Hera of how her husband tricked the Dryads, and she had only gone along with it out of fear for the forest and her kind, but the words will not come out. It is as though they are trapped in her throat, and when she can no longer hold them in, she splutters, and a sort of hissing noise falls out her mouth.

Hera smiled and circled around Echo as the nymph holds her throat. "As a rule, I do not care for your kind, whilst my husband is the apparent opposite. Oh you are not the first, harlot of green. I know my husband well, and he thinks he can trick me with these diversions of his. Do you know the story of Io?"

Echo has not, but she can't answer to say so.

"Io was a beloved priestess of mine who I grew to love like a daughter. My husband coveted her and took her maidenhood whilst he covered the sky with black clouds so I couldn't see. But I always know. To cover his cheat, he turned Io into a cow to hide her from me. I called his bluff and demanded her as a gift, mine to torture for eternity. She is still mine, and I never tire of her pain. You see little Nymph, you are against everything I stand for and more. Whilst wives lie on their backs in duty towards their husband, your kind doesn't just lie, but straddle in rapture. I will not allow it."



“It!” Echo screams, and her voice bounces off the sides of the mountain as though it is rising into the sky. She wants to say something, but she has lost control of her voice. She looks to the forest and wills for Zeus to appear, to put a stop to all of it.

*Surely he will come; surely he will see that it isn't fair.*

He doesn't come. Slowly, figures begin to appear, kicking and thrashing their legs wildly. They dangle by their necks from the branches of trees, clutching at their throats.

Echo's eyes widen as she recognises each of the figures as the Dryads. She turns to Hera, pleading with her eyes as she has no other way to beg.

“You have a choice, root slut,” Hera says gravely. “Either they die, or you become my new Io, my new toy to punish as I see fit. Choose now.”

For Echo, there is no choice. Above everything, she loves the forest. Without the Dryads, there won't be one. She tries to nod, but Hera stands stone faced, wanting her to make a reply.

Echo wretches at first, and her throat burns as she bellows, “Take... me.” Her voice is no longer like the tingling of bells, but hollow and cold. Again it bounces off the mountain, over and over.

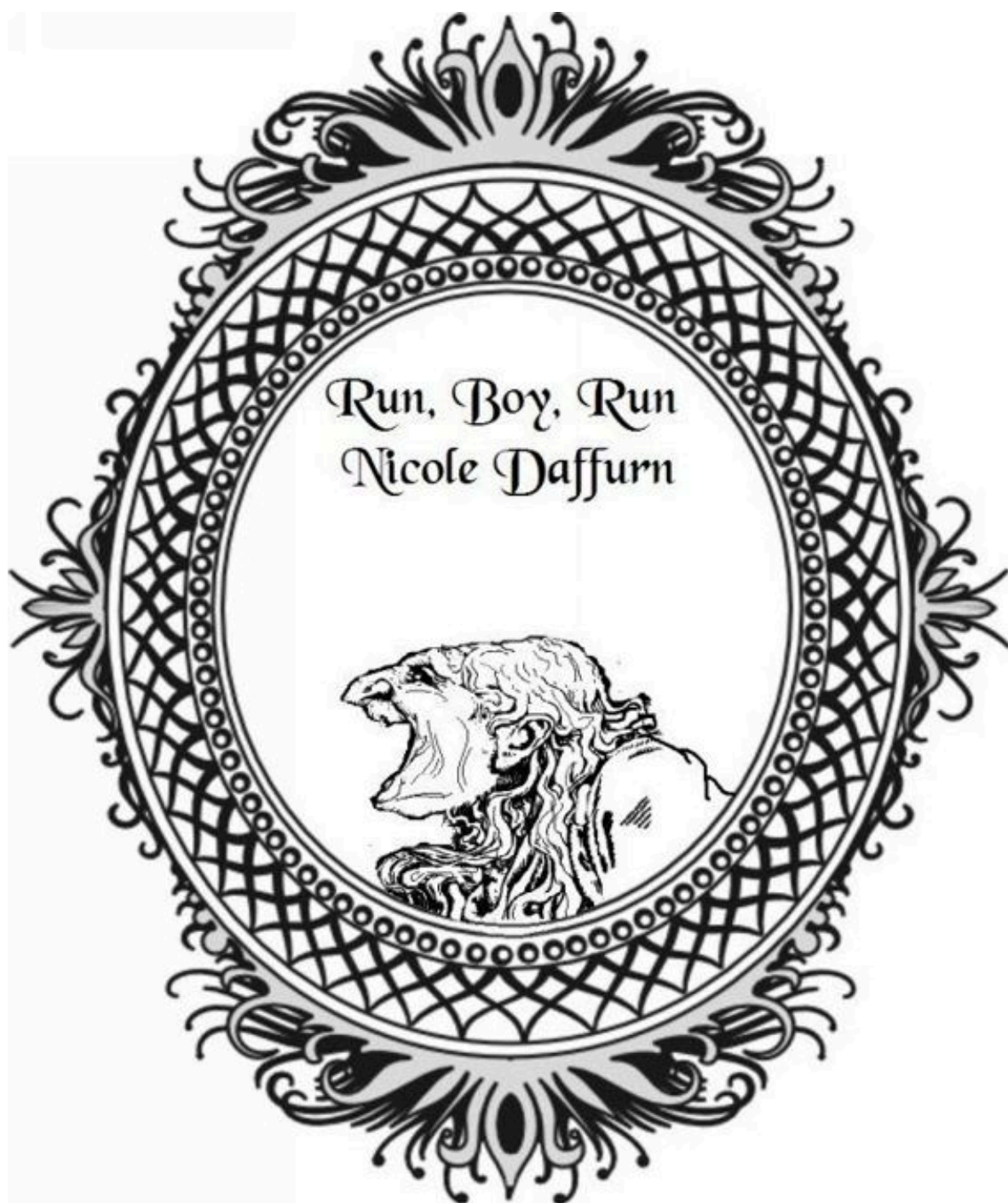
Hera looks up at the mountain as though she is following the direction of the voice. “It would seem, I have found my justice. No longer will you be Echo, speaker of words and tales. Men will never bask in the sound of your voice like it is music to their ears. Forever more, you will be known as Echo, repeater of words. You will never make a sound of your own ever again, wood whore.”



The other nymphs are free of both Zeus's insatiable appetite and Hera's vengeance, but the damage has been done. The forest remains, but alas, it is

too late. The Dryad nymphs have turned to legend, and men merely stumble on the place by accident rather than with intent. Forevermore, Echo's beautiful voice will never be heard again. Instead, she is trapped to repeat the last sound of those around—never the first to speak.

*My suffering is nothing, she thinks to herself, so long as the forest survives.*



# **Run, Boy, Run**

## Nicole Daffurn

\*This story is written in Uk English\*

Hansel watched from the confines of his cage as the old witch took her carving knife from the aged wooden kitchen block and moved slowly towards his sister, Gretel. Gretel was tied up tight to the shining silver island in the middle of the room, and from his vantage point, Hansel could see her struggling. He could see the tears that had gathered in the corner of her eyes, and were teetering on the edge of flowing over the sides of her face.

He closed his eyes, his breathing becoming more and more rapid with each breath. His sister's screams pierced the air as the witch cut her, and his eyes flew open at the sound. Gretel's leg had been sliced open, the gaping wound gushed with blood. Hansel watched as the witch slowly but surely brought the piece of missing flesh from Gretel's thigh directly to her lips. He watched in horror as her warped humanlike face gave way to something that resembled a crow. And he watched, and retched as she devoured the limp piece of his sister's leg.

"Gretel!" he screamed, agony tearing through his vocal chords and escaping his mouth in a high pitched shriek of his sister's name.

"Get away from her, you old hag!" he screamed, as he rattled the bars on his cage, determined one way or another to get free—to save his sister.

"Hansel...please."

The words were all Gretel needed to whisper for his anger to flare into rage. He extended his arms through the bars, almost dislocating his shoulder with the effort. He could see the keys he so desired hanging from the back pocket of the witches robe. The shiny metal bundle of keys was only inches away from his fingertips, if he could just stretch that little bit farther.

There! He had them, but he was too loud, too slow. The witch turned on him, and he was trapped. Hansel fumbled with the keys, trying desperately to get them in the lock before she had a chance to snatch them back from his bony fingers. She had almost starved him to death in that God awful cage, all the while fattening his sister up to satisfy her sadistic, disgusting cravings.

He was out of the cage before the podgy witch had a chance to steal the keys from him. Hansel allowed his rage to take over. He felt himself transform into something that he had never imagined he could have. Something evil.

*Fifteen years later.*

Gretel wiped the sweat from her palms as she entered the desolate town. The perspiration had nothing to do with the weather, though. As she had walked into the town a cool breeze swept across her body, making her pull her coat in closer to her skin. No, the sweat that she was emitting was a sign that she was in the right place.

She knew with just one look at the town that her brother would be there. For starters, there was no one around. Not a single soul in sight. In the distance, she could see buildings overtaken by nature, a Ferris wheel stationary against a grey sky, wild animal prints in the snow around her feet, and artificial lighting was non-existent. The town had long ago succumbed to the effects of neglect.

She walked up to the old 'Welcome' sign that symbolised the entry of the town. It was rusted out, a gaping hole opened up in the middle that she could see straight through. Blood smeared around the edges caused Gretel to swallow a mouth full of bile that had risen from her stomach.

Something had happened to Hansel that day in the woods. She had known it the moment he had escaped his cage. His eyes changed first, the iris's consumed with darkness. It had been then that she had realised what he was about to do. Strapped to the kitchen island she was useless to do anything but watch her brother carve the old witch into scraps of dog food. She hadn't stood a chance once he had been set free from his cage—even if he had still been of a tender age.

The sight of the blood upon the sign conjured up some of the deepest memories Gretel had pushed away since that day, but now...now they were beginning to surface again. Shaking her head and wiping the images from her mind, she sighed heavily before setting out once again to enter the town and find her brother.

Unnatural sounds filled Gretel's ears, and fear filled her entire body as she walked over the soft ground. Upon hearing what she could only describe as a woman screaming, she raised her eyebrows, a feeling of unease settling over her stomach. Her desire to save her brother, of course outweighed the uneasy feeling, and she proceeded forward into the untouched territory.

Gretel reached the first building out of breath, the air escaping her mouth and turning to steam as it mixed with cool air around her. Taking deep breaths she allowed herself to settle before her mind began an agonizing war with her body.

She needed to know what had happened there. What *he* had done, and yet her feet refused to leave the relative safety outside the building.

"Come on, you can do this!" she muttered to herself, trying to convince herself that all was going to be fine. "Just one foot in front of the other. One step at a time."

Finally her legs began to move, and she pushed the heavy wooden front doors inwards to allow her passage.

The large building, principally made from stone, looked like some sort of community centre, graffiti lined the blistering walls, chairs and tables had been upturned and yellowing, aged papers littered the floors. Gretel picked up a piece that had flown on the breeze to land at her feet—a flyer of some sort.

‘Pyroa Community Centre welcomes Dr. Hed Ballinski. 14/03/1817’ was all that the brochure said. *1817*. The year she had lost track of Hansel. *Could the two events be related?* She furrowed her brow and headed back out the door. There was nothing left to see in the community centre, nothing but death and destruction.

Back in the snow, Gretel once again started down the street. The sky was becoming darker by the second, and she wanted to be gone from the town—or lack thereof—before dusk. This was not a place she wanted to be trapped in for the night.

The next stop came too fast for Gretel’s liking, and she wanted to turn and run immediately upon seeing the large sign over the door. “*Pyroa Mental Asylum. Est. 1812*’ A shiver tingled its way up her back at the words that seemed more daunting to her than the abandoned town did.

Their parents had abandoned them, just as the people of this town had abandoned it, left them in the woods to die. Gretel had harboured a grudge against her parents for a long time after that day, and to tell the truth, she still did every time she looked at the wide, purple scar on her left thigh. But no one deserved what had happened to them. Actually, no one really knew what happened to them. Only that Hansel and Gretel had returned home against all odds. They had acted thrilled, of course, but underneath, she could tell they were unhappy. A few days after arriving home, Hansel had



asked Gretel to run some errands in town, and by the time she arrived back at her home, her parents blank, lifeless faces were staring at the ceiling.

They weren't dead. They were shocked, paralysed with fear. Gretel had run back to the town for help, and they were taken to a local mental asylum where they still resided. Their mouths gaped, and their lifeless eyes, hollow and dark, still stared. Still looked on in fear.

After all the years spent at her parents side, constantly watching over her shoulder in case the other patients attacked her, the thought of entering yet another mental asylum didn't sit well with Gretel at all. With butterflies in her stomach, she started to sweat as her feet took her closer to the entrance.

Walking in through the great double doors at the front of the building, she was greeted with a terrifying sight. Face masks were scattered over the dust covered floors; dolls with no heads joined them. The walls were covered with bloody hand prints and long gouged fingernail marks, and what looked like the remnants of old clothes were strewn about all over the place. Hospital beds equipped with thick straps loitered in the large entry room, silent and abandoned.

Despite the sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach, Gretel moved off down a side corridor, finding more of the same fingernail marks and blood stained walls. Tears pricked in the corners of her eyes as she made her way through the mess and hell of the past, thinking Hansel couldn't have done all of the damage himself. There had to be another explanation. There *had* to be.

Somewhere along the corridor Gretel had come across an old elevator. The kind with cast iron barred doors and a lever on the inside to operate it. She peered in wearily at first, worried that the time spent out of action may have caused instability. She tested it, first with one foot lightly placed upon

the floor, and then the other. Once inside, she started to feel a little safer, and turned to work out how to operate the elevator that would take her to the lower levels of the large asylum.

The mechanics of it seemed fairly simple. Close the doors, pull the lever to head to the right level. Pulling the lever though, Gretel instantly knew something wasn't right. The elevator travelled too fast, it wasn't going to stop on the floor she had selected.

Panic started to creep in then, and she pulled the lever with all her strength. It wouldn't budge. That was it, she was going to die in a broken down elevator, in a creepy ass mental asylum, in a town that nobody knew about.

*Then again, maybe not.*

Finally the lever moved from its position with a grinding halt, and not a moment too soon. Gretel looked up to the floor numbers and realized she had stopped at the basement, the last floor before impending death would have taken her.

The smell that hit her face upon stopping was like nothing she had ever smelled in her life. It started her retching and didn't stop until she had pulled down one of the facemasks which neatly hung along the wall of the elevator.

Gretel stepped out, turned down a corridor to her left and found herself entering a large circular room full of doors. It might have been her overactive imagination, but she was sure she could hear banging in the distance. She wandered around, pushing her ears to the blood-stained doors, then suddenly stopped in her tracks. Someone had appeared at the far side of the room.

A woman, so pale you could see her veins through her skin. Her flesh, eaten away in places, was clad in leather clothing. She looked like a butcher

with her leather boots, apron and gloved hands. In one hand, she held a rusty saw, in the other, a severed arm.

Gretel wasn't fooled though; she knew this was no butcher. This was a witch. *The* witch to be precise. The witch that Hansel had supposedly killed all those years ago in the forest by their home town.

"How?" Gretel managed to get past her lips. She saw a flicker then, the witch's images witching to that of her brother's. Tears erupted from her eyes, her throat swollen with fear and grief. It hadn't been Hansel at all. All those years, she had believed her own brother to be evil. All those years, she had hunted him down, tracked him across countries and continents in an attempt to save him, and yet, there was no need.

With a wicked grin on her face the witch croaked out three words, "Run boy, run!" Gretel had no idea why she referred to her as a boy, but she wasn't going to stick around to find out.

Gretel turned to run, but let out a scream when the doors in the circular room started to open. Through them entered...people? Their limbs were skewed and in the wrong spot, the old scars on their body, thick and red and angry. Their mouths open, fanged teeth jutted out in snarls that rendered her legs useless.

Was this what had really happened to the town? Was this what she was to become?



The 'Welcome' sign that symbolised the entry to town was rusted out, a gaping hole in the centre that you could see through. Hansel stood, his hand on his hips, shaking away the nerves of what he knew was to come. After all, he had come there for one of two reasons—to kill his sister or to save her. He crouched down next to the welcome sign, closing his eyes at the

sight of the old dried blood and hearing, not for the first time, the last words his sister had spoken to him, “Run boy, run!” He stood, a fierce look in his eyes, and as he read the name of the town - ‘Pyroa’ - he heard the scream of a young woman pierce the air from somewhere unbelievably far away.



# Prince Charming

**Jennifer Raygoza**

My mother used to say that, one day, I would grow up and meet prince charming. I would live in a castle of my own, and servants would bring me my every wish and desire. She would smile and say, when it came to comparison, my castle would be more superior than hers. Her eyes would suddenly light up, and her head would tilt back.

She was convinced I would rule with an iron fist and an open heart. She would lift my chin up with her finger and say “Princess Katia, you *will* be queen, my love, and roses will bloom as you walk past them. Your people will bow to you, not in fear, but out of respect.”

I dreamed about that very day when I was a little girl. Well mother, you were wrong, because *that* was a fucking fairytale.

“If you attempt to escape again, I will take this hot iron and press it into the side of your face. That way no man will ever want you. Do you understand, whore?” His last and final warning to me. His name was Terragon.

He is big, mean and ugly. This man I speak of is, unfortunately, my husband. The funny thing is, I had never even seen or met him before we wed. I don’t know how I got here, and I don’t know who he is. He seems to know a lot about me, nonetheless. Although, it appears he can’t recall my name, since he always addresses me as whore or bitch.

The last thing I can remember before I ended up here, in the care of this psycho, is leaving my family’s castle to take a short walk through the

beautiful Orangewood forest. The next thing you know, I woke up groggy, on a cold, dusty wood floor, with this asshole towering over me.

I wish it had just been a nightmare, but it wasn't. This is my life now. Chained, gagged and forced into marriage. When I say forced, I mean *literally* forced. I can't believe he actually found someone willing to marry us. The minister could clearly see I was being held captive and had proceeded with the lovely union as if it didn't bother him that I was screaming for his help. Nothing says love like tying up your soon-to-be wife and beating the shit out of her until she says her vows. Sick son-of-a-bitch. I can only imagine a hefty bounty was paid to the minister for complying. One day, I am going to kill them both. How's that for a happy ending?

I look down at my clothes, and then at the ugly chain that had kept me prisoner here in this hell hole for so long. I have spent what feels like years in the same dirty, ripped dress, walking around this old cottage with a steel chain around my ankle. At first, my sensitive ankle would bruise and bleed, but now years later, the skin is tough and leathery. I can barely feel anything there anymore. Every time I walk, that chain rattles, and every time that chain rattles, I imagine me wrapping it around my husband's throat.

Trust me, I have plenty of reason to. He forces me to do unthinkable things for his entertainment. He once made me clean the floor with my tongue while he touched himself. Punishing me turns him on. His eyes grow dark, and he forces himself on me. Most of the time, I close my eyes and pretend I am in a far-away place. Although, nothing I can imagine could bring me far enough away from here—not while he is grunting from behind me.

I am tired and hopeless, but I never give up on the idea of escaping. I have been working on this link in the chain for weeks, maybe even months

now. I wait until Terragon leaves for the day, and I constantly bang the chain. At first, nothing, but over time it has become dented, worn and bent. As soon as he left today, I began to bang on it again, until a link snapped.

This is my second attempt to flee, and now the chain is broken, all I can feel is fear. I have my shaky hand on the door knob. My heart is racing and sweat beads have formed across my hairline. If he catches me, he will burn the hell out of my pretty face.

I throw open the old, wood door and run like hell down into the forest. This time I know there is no house or person around us. Not as far as the eye can see. I know this because the last time I escaped I ran around screaming for help, wishing someone lived near to hear my cries. It had taken seconds before Terragon found me and took me back home. That was darkest night of my life, because freedom was given and taken away within seconds.

I try not to think about that now, as I run, breathless, for my life. Every so often, my bare feet hit a rock or stick, and the pain shoots through my legs. I won't let it stop me. I run as if there is no tomorrow. I have no idea where I am going, but anyway pointed to a better life.

I feel excited, and laughter erupts as I quickly look back to see that no one is following me. Everything is going as planned, until I hit the mud stocks. My feet feel them first, and then I quickly sink deep down, until my knees disappear. My body falls forward, and mud splatters across my already bruised face.

"There you are you, bitch."

I hear his deep voice rumble from behind me, and a sick feeling comes over me as I close my eyes. I feel the pressure of the bottom of his boot hit my face. The sting travels across my cheek and tears fall down as I cry out in pain.



“I’m sorry, Terragon. Please don’t hurt me. Please,” I beg. I start to tremble. His punishment will be far worse than death itself.

“You know what I am going to do to you? Leave you right there stuck in the mud. In about two hours, this entire forest will be dark, and the wolves will be out looking for dinner. I am going to plant myself in that tree right up there and watch them rip you apart.” He looks at me with that evil grin.

I lay my head down into the mud. “Just kill me. Kill me now,” I cry out.

“As if I would let you off that easy, you stupid whore.” He walks over and grabs my hair with one hand and my arm with the other. He pulls me out of the mud and proceeds to drag me back home by my hair. I scream loudly, praying that if my prince charming is out there he will come for me.

From out of the bushes, jumps a hooded man wearing all black. He carries a bow and has it aimed at Terragon. Without hesitation, he shoots an arrow straight through Terragon’s heart. His heavy body falls with a thud to the ground, and I dropped to my knees in fear that the man will kill me too.

“Are you alright, miss?” the man asks.

I can’t respond. I slide back on the ground as he steps forward. The mystery man removes his hood, revealing his shaggy brown hair and blue eyes. He is as attractive as a man can be.

“I said, Are you alright?”

I watch him look me over. I am covered in bruises, blood and mud. He looks as if he wants to reach down and pick me up. I nod before he had the chance to. He turns to walk away but stops. I watch him stand there, with his back to me. He swiftly turns around.

“Do you have somewhere safe to go?” he asks.

I shake my head. He looks as if he is slightly irritated that I said no. Maybe he thought I would be a burden to him.

“Fine. Come with me. I wouldn’t feel right about leaving you alone out here. Not after what I just saw.” He sticks his hand out, but I hesitate to grab it. “Come on. I don’t have all day, you know.”

I reach up and accept his hand. He pulls me up with so much force, I land in his arms.

“What is your name?” he asks.

I am inches from his face and find myself breathless. I can’t respond.

“Your name, miss?” he repeats as he brushes back my brown hair from my face with his hand.

I look into his hypnotizing blue eyes. “Katia Vonderburg,” I finally reply.

His eyes widen and he releases me from his arms.

“Katia Vonderburg? I can’t believe this. I had given up hope of ever finding you.” He stares at me oddly.

My heart skips a beat. “How do you know me?”

“You’re parents have been looking for you for a very long time.”

“And you are?” I squint my eyes at him.

“My name is Hawk Graceland. I was hired to locate you. I have searched town by town and nothing. Now, here you basically fall into my lap.”

“I don’t know where I am, or how to get home. Will you take me to them please?” I plead.

A sad look washes over his face. “I can’t. I’m sorry. They were both killed about a year ago.”

I place my hand on my chest. It feels as if time has stopped. My surroundings become blurry. I start to cry, but I can’t. I can feel my breathing getting shallow. My knees buckle, and I plop down into the dirt.

He looks away for a second, before he bends down to me. I stare at an old rock sitting next to me as his words repeat in my head. My parents are dead. I think he is still speaking to me, but I can't hear a word he is saying anymore.

"Katia? Are you okay?" He touches the top of my hand.

I flinch and snap out of it. I look up at him. I must look like a broken little girl sitting there.

"I'm sorry for your loss. They were good people. Their castle was ambushed and set on fire by Cagers. They refused to leave and died in the fire," Hawk said.

"A fire? They died in a fire," my voice is shaky. I place my head in my hands and try to take a few slow, deep breathes in before I pass out. My eyes water, and I imagine them screaming for their lives as the fire burned them to ashes.

"What is a Cager?" I choke out. My fingers grip the hem of my dress, and I avoid eye contact with Hawk. Instead, I look at the ground, waiting for an answer.

"That piece of trash lying on the ground is a Cager. Cagers are a barbaric clan. They take, they steal and they destroy families that have any royal blood, no matter how small or large. They despise the wealthy, and their only motivation in life is to kill the bloodline at all cost. It is a miracle you are still alive Katia. No one that has been taken by a Cager has lived to tell about it."

I turn around and stare over at Terragon, my heart racing in anger and my breathing quickening. I pick up one of the heavy rocks that lie next to me, stand up and run over to bash Terragon's head in. Before I can do it, I feel a hand grasp my wrist.

“Trust me. It won’t feel as good as you think it will. He is dead already anyway.” Hawk grabs the rock in my hand and tosses it aside.

I narrow my eyes at him and look at my wrist. He slowly releases his fingers and reaches his hand out for mine. I decline by looking away.

“Suit yourself. We have to start moving. It is getting late and the forest animals will want to come out and play—and I don’t mean in a good way.”

I nod and follow behind him. It is one of the longest walks I have made. I have nothing but time and thoughts to bite at me, and I couldn’t feel worse. I have come from nowhere and have nowhere to go. My sadistic, barbaric husband is now dead and my parents were killed. Being free is not at all what I expected.

My mother’s words haunted me. “Iron fist, Katia. Take any pain that life throws at you and lock it up, for only the strong survive.”

That’s exactly what I have done up until now, and I refuse to cry, no matter how much the death of them hurts. I will lock it up and never again think about this day.

After a long silent journey we make our way to a small cottage. Hawk points to it. “This is mine.”

He points again, over to a pond. “You’re more than welcome to bathe in there. You can’t come inside until you get all that mud off of you. I will get you some clean clothes. I don’t have any dresses, so you will have to wear my clothes. If that’s okay.”

I nod.

“Just stay here. I won’t take long.” Hawk scurries off.

I stand by the pond, looking around for deadly animals. The sun has almost set, and the forest is becoming scarier by the minute. Hawk comes out, places the clothes on a rock, and starts to walk away and back up to the house.

“Wait. Aren’t you going to keep watch for hungry wolves?”

“No. Not while you’re naked.” Hawk raises an eyebrow.

I almost feel offended by how fast he said that. I have always considered myself a beautiful girl, but looking like this, I can understand how no one would even look twice at me. Terragon had damaged me and he was right, no man would want me. He didn’t even need to put an iron to my face. Those years with him did enough.

“If you don’t mind, I’ll feel safer knowing you’re here. Just turn around.” I demand.

Once his back is to me, I strip off the hideous dress. I stand naked by the pond and dip my big toe into the cold water. I quickly run in and scrub the dry, hard mud from my body and face with my nails. I try to wash the mud out of my hair, but the tangles are so bad I have rat’s nests in several places. I can’t remember the last night I brushed my hair.

“So Katia, what does a Cager do with a princess when he has her?” Hawk asks with his back still facing me.

“He marries her first. Then he chains her up, rapes, and beats her. He humiliates her for his own enjoyment, and when the sun rises each morning, he does it again.”

Hawk turns around with importance and looks at me as if it pains him to hear those things. My arms quickly cross over to hide my breast, and he looks down when he remembers I am naked.

“I think we should go inside now. It’s getting dark.” Hawk turns around again.

I step out of the water and slip on his clothes. His shirt is big, and hangs down to my knees, but it will work for now. Anything is better than that damn dress. I try to put on his pants, but they refuse to stay up, so I take them off.

“I’m done. The pants don’t fit.”

Hawk turns to me and looks me up and down. His eyes soften for a quick second. I think I hear a gasp escape his lips.

“We should...um....” he pauses. He begins to look uncomfortable.

My big brown eyes wait patiently for him to finish.

“We should get inside now,” Hawk finally spits out.

I let him lead the way as I trail behind.

As soon as we both stepped inside he spins around to face me. “Look. I don’t normally have company. I don’t like things moved around, and I don’t like being bothered,” Hawk’s tone is now sharp.

“I won’t cause any trouble, and I won’t be here long.” I think I surprise him, because he opens his mouth to say something, but quickly closes it.

“Well, you can have that bed there. I sleep in the other room. If you are hungry the food is over there, just call if you need anything else.” He turns and walks away.

Even though he is being very dry with me, he is a hell of a lot nicer than Terragon ever was.

I waited until Hawk leaves to respond to the noises that my stomach is making. Terragon barely fed me, and sadly, I have become accustomed to hunger pains. I slowly make my way over to where the food is, finding an apple and some bread. I crunch into the apple as I hear footsteps behind me.

I turn around and bump into Hawk. He is holding a blanket. We are so close; our noses touch for a quick second. I have a chance to look into his beautiful blue eyes again and take in the muscles that peak out from his shirt. I swallow the lump in my throat.

“Earlier, you said you did not want to stay outside with me because I was naked. Do you not find me attractive?” I place the apple down and wait for a response.

He gulps, places the blanket in my hands, and walks away without an answer. I close my eyes and question why I would even ask that of a stranger.

I decide to forget about eating and lay my head to rest. I am here with a man I have just met, but I have never felt safer. I just have to get the idea that he is my prince charming out of my head. Maybe praying for him and having him show up is just a coincidence, or is it indeed fate?

In the morning, I awake with him standing over me. “You can’t stay here Katia.”

“I’m sorry.” I respond.

“You have to go. I will take you to town where you belong.” Hawk has both hands on his hips.

“Why are you being like this?”

“Because.”

“Because?” I place my hands up.

“Because you’re beautiful, and I can’t...do this.”

“You are kicking me out because I am beautiful?” I don’t know whether to be offended or say thank you.

“I’ll take you safely to town, and you can stay with people I know. They will help you.”

“No. No need. I can do it myself.” I reply and jump out of bed.

“Katia, wait.” He grabs me by the shoulders.

It is really the first time I have felt his touch, except when he had briefly touched my hand back by the mud stocks. I stare at him. *Say something*, I think. *Anything*.

He looks at me in silence.

“Nothing to say? I think we are done here then. Just point me in the right direction, and I will be gone.”

“Damn it, woman. You are lucky that Cager didn’t kill you with the mouth you have on you.” He suddenly realizes that what he say is wrong.

“I would have rather died, because what he did to me was worse than death.” I storm out of the cottage with no sense of direction, no shoes and no pants.

“Katia, stop.”

I hear Hawk yelling from behind me, footsteps running and then I feel hands on my shoulders—spinning me around. I am suddenly squeezed into his chest and his lips are planted on mine. It is passionate, and I feel wanted by him, but when he pulls away, he looks angry.

“Why did you do that?”

“I don’t know,” Hawk responds. “You. You’re so fucking stubborn. I didn’t know what else to do.”

“So you thought kissing me...would do what?”

“Stop you, or shut you up.”

“I don’t get you. You want me to go one second, and then you want me to stay the next. Let me tell you something, Hawk. I have spent the last two years locked up in a place where I didn’t want to be at. I don’t need to stay in a place where I am not wanted.”

Hawk grabs me by my waist and kisses me again. I push his chest away, not because I don’t like it. I like it a lot, but Prince Charming is not at all what I expected. He is hot and cold. He is indecisive, and I don’t understand him at all.

“What the hell am I doing? You’re beautiful, Katia.”

“You keep saying that. What does that even mean?”

Hawk turns away in silence. I shake my head in frustration. I decide I needed to get the hell out of here. I turn to leave and take two steps.

“Do you not find me attractive?” He asks.



He is now using my question to him from last night. I stop in my tracks. I laugh at this situation, because not twenty four hours ago, I was chained up in a house serving someone I dreamed about killing every night. Now, I stand half naked in front of somebody I barely know, arguing over whether I should stay or go. I swing around to face him. He no longer holds anger in his eyes.

“Hawk. You don’t know this, but I prayed for you. I asked for Prince Charming to rescue me, and you came to save me. Almost sent from the gods. I think if Terragon would have taken me back to that house, and let me live, I would have killed myself at the very first chance I could. Yes. I find you attractive in so many ways, but the most difficult thing for me, is the fact I barely know you.”

“You prayed for me?” he tilted his head.

“All of my life.”

He ran his hand through his hair and released a few curse words.

“You’re royalty. You’re beautiful, and you’re better than me, but I found you yesterday looking like a peasant. My heart stopped beating when I saw what that Cager was doing to you. Yesterday, you told me your name, and everything fell into place. The girl I have been searching for, the long lost princess was standing before me, injured and shattered. I wanted to wrap you in my arms and make the pain go away, but you are right. We barely know each other, so how can I feel so strong for you. Maybe it is the painting of you that you’re parents gave me. I stared at it every night until every curve and line of your face stayed in my memory. Katia, you deserve to spend your time getting to know a real prince. I’m poor. I am a tracker, and I kill men. I am not your prince charming.

“My family is dead. The castle is burned, and I am poor now. I am broken, and I am shattered, just like you said. I am not a princess anymore.

I'm just a woman looking at a man who saved her from a lifetime of torture. You *are* my prince charming."

He steps forward and places his arm around my waist. "We have a lifetime, Katia"

"A lifetime to what?"

"We have a lifetime to get to know each other, princess." Hawk leans down and kisses me.

There is no big castle and no servants. No roses bloom as I walked by, and no people bow to me, but I feel as if I am a queen in his arms, and that's all that matters in this moment.



# **Bloody Red**

\*This story contains sexual content. Ages 18+ suggested\*

## Jade Heart

Thick, gray clouds blocked the sun from the mid-afternoon sky as I slipped my cape on and pulled the hood over my head. Storms were expected today, but I couldn't let them deter me. I was running low on the magic that protected me, and the only thing that could restore it was the crystals my grandmother kept locked away in her cabin on the far side of the Dark Woods. Getting them from her wouldn't be easy, because she was a stingy old bitch who thought about nothing but herself. Even when my parents passed years ago, she had refused to take me in. Instead, she had left me at the mercy of Hallow's End.

God, she would be forever cursed for that decision.

I took a deep breath as I opened the door to the condemned inn and stepped outside, smoothing my skirt over my thighs. Focusing on the muddy ground at my feet, I moved as swiftly as I could through the street—but it wasn't quick enough.

Words like “whore”, “bitch”, and “spawn of the devil” soon found me. The women of Hallow's End were like a plague, brutal and deadly. Their words were harsh and stung with every breath. They were angry because all the men in town came to me to satisfy their needs, even if it was against my will. The men were just as bad. Rough and demanding, some of them nearly killing me to get what they wanted.

I ran into the woods, knowing they would refuse to follow me in. The townspeople were only frightened by one thing—*the wolf*. A creature they swore existed, but to me, it was a myth made up by the town elders to keep everyone confined to their stupid town.

Hot tears stung my eyes as I continued to curse the town under my breath.

Rushing deeper into the forest to gain some distance, I struggled through the briars and heavy brush until my bare legs had become shaky and weak. Leaning against a tree, I collapsed to the ground, weeping.

“Are you okay?” an unfamiliar voice asked.

I glanced up, and through my wall of tears, I connected with a pair of greenish-yellow eyes. Eyes, so deep and mysterious, that they instantly drew me in. I was speechless as I continued to gaze at the man in front of me.

“Do you need help?” He crouched down to my level, his muscular arm stretching out to me. When his hand landed on my shoulder, his touch caused me to shudder with excitement.

I swallowed hard as a tingling sensation erupted deep inside me. “Who are you?”

“The name is Larrick.” He withdrew his hand, but remained at my level.

“How come I’ve never seen you before?”

Larrick’s eyes seemed to glow. “I guess because you’ve never looked hard enough.” The edges of his lips curved into a smile. “I’ve seen you plenty of times. The name is Red, right?”

“Actually,” I glanced away from him, “it depends on who you ask.” I hoped he wouldn’t ask me to explain.

Larrick shifted his body closer to mine. “I know the names they call you, Red,” he whispered, his warm breath caressing my skin. “And I don’t like how they treat you. In fact, just the thought of how you are treated makes it hard to contain the beast inside of me.”

“Beast?” I gazed up into his greenish-yellow eyes. The anger swirling inside them was undeniable. How could this guy, who I’d never meant, seem to care so deeply about me? It didn’t make any sense. Nobody had ever cared for me.

Larrick lifted his arms, pushing the hood down and releasing my dark brown hair. He slid his hands down, holding onto the sides of my face, as he peered intensely into my eyes. “I’ve waited a very long time for this.”

Suddenly, he pulled my face to his, kissing me on the lips. Unable to refuse him, I gave in. Our lips parted, and he traced his warm tongue around the inside of my mouth, igniting a fire deep within me that caused parts of my body to yearn for more.

I brought my arms up, raking my fingers through Larrick’s short, dark hair, as his hands slipped down the sides of my neck to my breasts. He held them gently through my shirt, rubbing his thumb over my hardened nipples.

Strange things began happening inside my body, things that I’d never experienced before. Men had taken advantage of me, but this encounter with Larrick, it was much different. I felt things. Throbbing and pulsating in parts of my body that were screaming to be touched.

A low growl rumbled from inside his throat as he broke away from the kiss and traced his lips down my neck, causing my body to tremble.

I slid my hand away from his hair and explored his body, the tips of my fingers gliding over the pulsating muscle concealed by his jeans. As it hardened even more, a wave of electricity shot through my own sweetness, causing a low moan to escape through my lips.

Larrick bit down on my neck, hard, and squeezed my breasts as he shifted his weight, spilling us both to the ground.

I closed my eyes to savor his touch as his hands continued to explore me.

“You’re mine now, Red,” Larrick growled into my ear. “I’ll never let anyone hurt you again.”

I slowly opened my eyes to find myself alone in the woods. I sat up, frantically searching for Larrick, but he was nowhere in sight. At first, I thought I had only dreamed about him, but after I noticed all my clothes sitting in a pile next to a tree, I knew he was real.

*But how could he just leave me like that? I thought he cared?*

Anger boiled under my skin as I dressed. I pulled my hood up as the thunder began to rumble in the distance and started toward my grandmother's house. I needed those crystals more than ever. Apparently, I couldn't count on Larrick for protection; even though he had said he'd never let anyone hurt me again. It was probably just some ploy so I'd sleep with him. Not that he needed it. I had been instantly drawn to him, so I would have probably done it anyway.

The woods began to clear out, and soon, I saw my grandmother's house in the distance. How I dreaded coming to my grandmother's, but I had no other choice. I needed the crystals.

I walked up to the tiny shack and knocked on her door.

The door opened with a creak and my grandmother poked her head out. "Red, what are you doing here?" My grandmother narrowed her gaze.

Drops of rain began falling as thunder clapped above me. "Nice to see you, too, Grandmother," I grumbled. "Are you going to invite me in, or should I just stand out here in the rain?"

"No," she snapped, holding the door steady. "I know what you're here for, and I'm not giving them to you. You don't deserve to be protected by the crystals."

The heat swirled around inside me. She was not going to deny me the protection I needed. "Why do you hate me so much?" I glared at her. "You've despised me ever since I can remember."



“Because you are the spawn of the devil. You deserve everything that town gives you. You are just like your father.”

I pushed hard on the door, but she held it steady. “My father? Is that what this is about?”

“Yes, Red.” She tightened her lips. “Your father took your mother away from me. Took her into that filthy town. Now, you have to live with his decision.”

“That’s unfair!” I shook my head and balled my hands into fists. “You blame me because my mother and father were in love?”

“Go away, Red.” She glared at me. “I won’t hesitate to rid the world of you myself. You should have never been born.”

Hot tears stung my eyes. *How can my own flesh and blood treat me like this?* I turned away from the door and started down the steps. “My father wasn’t the devil,” I shouted over my shoulder, “you are! And you will burn in hell for your sins!”

The door slammed behind me as I continued to walk away. As I stepped back into the trees, loud screaming came from my grandmother’s house. I quickly turned and raced back out of the woods toward her house. When I got to her door, it was ripped from its hinges and thrown on the porch.

“What could have done this,” I whispered, peering into the eerily silent house. A chill came over me, causing the hair on my arms to stand on end. Something was clearly wrong.

I slowly stepped through the doorway and gasped. Blood was everywhere; streaked over the walls, puddled on the floor, and splattered on the ceiling. Something else caught my attention, as well. Footprints smeared the blood, not just normal footprints, huge paw prints as if from a giant dog.

I swallowed hard, unable to believe any of this was happening. Then I noticed a pair of bloody feet around the corner.

I crept forward and peered around the wall. Larrick was kneeling over my grandmother's body. Her face had been completely ripped off, and her hands looked as if they had been chewed. Larrick glanced up at me with wide eyes, blood staining the corners of his mouth. The breath rushed out of me as my legs became weak and unsteady. I didn't know what to think, didn't know what to say.

"Red," he whispered hoarsely.

I turned and raced out of the house. *Run, run, run*, the voice in my head chanted as I made it into the trees.

"Red," Larrick yelled from my grandmother's door, "wait!"

*He killed her. He freaking killed her.* I didn't know what to think. Part of me was happy the bitch was dead, but the sight of Larrick and blood had frightened the hell out of me. I'd never seen a dead person before, especially one missing their entire face.

I pushed my legs faster through the Dark Forest, desperate to make it back to the town. Not that the town was any better, but at least I'd be able to hide away in my condemned hotel until the men of the village realized I had returned. The thought of that caused me to slow down. Either way I was fucked.

Suddenly, a huge wolf jumped out of the trees, growling and snarling. I lost my balance and fell backward, hitting the back of my head on a tree.

The pain was excruciating, but I tried to focus on the black beast in front of me as my vision went in and out.

The wolf yowled in pain as its skin and fur ripped. The sound was sickening, adding nausea to my growing list of problems.

As the beast reared up on its hind legs, everything went black.

“Red, can you hear me,” Larrick urgently whispered.

I slowly opened my eyes. Larrick was right there in front of me, his greenish-yellow eyes consumed by pain and sadness. “Larrick,” I responded in a hoarse voice. “What are you?”

“I’m so sorry you had to find out that way.” He slipped his arm under my head. “I wanted to tell you earlier, but I was frightened I would scare you away.”

“You’re the wolf,” I gasped, not knowing what to think.

Larrick’s lips tightened. “Yes, I’m the wolf your town fears. I’m sure you’ve heard many stories about me.”

“I’ve actually never paid attention to any of them,” I whispered as I gazed into his eyes.

“You’re not frightened?”

“Not unless there’s something I should be frightened about?” I smiled softly, seemingly more drawn to him than before.

“No, there’s no need to be frightened of me.” He leaned down and placed his lips to mine. He broke away from the kiss, his eyes drowning in desire. “I told you that you belong to me. So, you’re safe.”

“Larrick,” I exhaled his name. “Kiss me again.”

He pushed his lips to mine as a low groan escaped from deep inside of him.

The sound took me over the edge, giving me a high I’d never experienced before. My hand drifted downward, and I realized he was completely naked. Butterflies flapped against my insides as I wrapped my fingers around his hard, pulsating muscle. I slid my hand up and down over his warm cock, and a tingling sensation snaked its way down into my valley.

Unable to resist him anymore, I rolled over on top of him, shedding my cape and my shirt. His lips were instantly connected to my breasts as if they were magic, and his tongue rolling over my hard nipples.

Larrick leaned back, placing his hands on my hips as I lifted in the air. He caught the edges of my skirt and guided me back down, his warmth slipping deep inside me.

I tilted my head back, savoring the rush of emotions exploding through me, as we both moved in a slow, steady rhythm.

Suddenly sitting up, he pressed his chest against my breasts and held me tightly as I continued to thrust my hips against him. His muscle seemed to be expanding inside me, stretching out the walls of my valley.

I squeezed my eyes shut, holding back my screams of need and desire, as he pushed me down harder and harder. I cried out as everything inside me came together, bringing me closer and closer to my limit.

When I opened my eyes, Larrick was watching me. The beast he tried so hard to push down was trying to come back out. The war going on inside him was obvious as he concentrated on me.

Knowing the wolf lingered inside of him didn't scare me, it turned me on even more. I met him thrust for thrust, and together, we both cried out as he pushed me down one last time and held me there, his warm muscle more alive than ever.

When I collapsed on top of him, Larrick pushed the strands of hair out of my face as I lay on his chest. "Stay out in the forest with me," he whispered. "I can take care of you, keep you safe."

"Where will we live, Larrick?"

"At my house." He chuckled softly. "It's not much, but I can make it better for you. I can even expand it if you want me to."

"You'd do that for me?"

“Yes,” he said. “I don’t want you to go back to the village. You don’t belong there. You belong with me.”

He was right. I didn’t belong in the village. “I just need to go back and get a few things.” I slowly shifted off of him, my eyes drifting over his marvelous body as I grabbed my shirt and cape and put them on.

Larrick smiled. “I’ll go get dressed and tidy up my house some.” He placed his hand on the side of my face. “What do you say we meet outside the village in about an hour? Will that give you enough time to get what you need?”

“More than enough.” I leaned forward, placing my lips on his. “I’ll see you then.” With those words, I jumped up from the forest floor and raced away from Larrick and toward the village. I had to hurry, because I wanted to get back to him as fast as I could.



When I entered the village, I was unable to hide the smile on my face. As the women began to surround me, I completely ignored them, making my way to the inn.

I was almost there when one of the women shouted, “The whore bears the mark of the beast!”

I spun around, having no idea what she was talking about. Everyone turned their attention to me, their eyes focusing on my neck.

My hood. In all my excitement, I totally forgot Larrick had bit me earlier. I struggled to pull up my hood, but it was too late. They had all seen me.

Two of the townsmen seemed to appear out of nowhere, grabbing my arms and dragging me toward the center of town.

“No,” I screamed. “Let me go!”

Suddenly, the entire town had ended up in the same area, encircling us.

“Burn the whore,” they all chanted, pumping their fists in the air. “She’ll draw the wolf to our town! Kill her now!”

*These people are nuts*, I thought as my breathing intensified. They couldn’t possibly be serious. However, as some of the people stacked piles of wood inches from me, I knew they were serious. I struggled to fight my way out of their grasps, but it was useless.

Hot tears rained from my eyes as one of the men threw a match into the pile of wood, igniting it. Fear and terror erupted inside me. “Larrick!” I screamed my lover’s name, even though I knew he was too far away to hear me.

Two more men moved toward us, carrying a pole. “Tie her to this so she doesn’t escape.”

The men holding me pushed me over to the pole. I kicked and screamed, trying frantically to escape the grasps of the crazy town, but instead, they forced me to the ground. As they placed me over the pole and looped the string over me once, a loud growl emerged from the trees.

The entire town turned toward the forest as a huge, snarling wolf jumped out, gaze directed at me.

I took a deep breath, and exhaled his name. “Larrick.”

The townspeople backed up, some of them turning and running toward the buildings—but they didn’t have a chance. Larrick was faster than anything I’d ever encountered, as if he was equipped with the super power of speed.

As he raced through the crowd, he snapped every person’s neck with the power of his massive jaws. Ten men dropped within minutes. Larrick felt no mercy for anyone in the town, including the women, which were his easiest targets.

I slipped the rope off of me and quickly stood up, wondering how well Larrick could control the beast. *Do I look like all the other townspeople to the wolf, or will he recognize me?*

My question was answered as Larrick turned his head, greenish-yellow eyes peering in my direction. He trotted up and nuzzled me with his large nose, pushing me toward the forest. I turned and started for the trees, but something caught my eye.

As Larrick continued to take the town down one by one, one man stalked him, a knife in his hand. Not sure whether a blade could actually hurt Larrick, I couldn't chance it.

I raced toward the guy, but as I closed in on him, he spun around to me. "Devil child," he screamed and lunged.

Larrick swung his huge tail around, knocking my attacker off balance. The guy crashed to the ground on his back, the knife slipping from his hand.

I grabbed the knife and peered into the man's eyes. I had no mercy for him. "You say I'm the devil, but you're the one going to hell. And you deserve everything that's coming for you." I lifted the knife in the air, and dropped my arms, ramming the knife into his chest.

I released the handle of the knife and sat there, staring as blood bubbled up from his mouth. Then I gazed around the town, taking in the dead bodies littered everywhere. I felt nothing for these people. Nothing at all.

A hand landed on my shoulder, causing me to spin around in defense.

"Red," Larrick exhaled my name.

I swallowed hard as the blood dripped from the edges of his lips, and then I stood up, flinging myself into his arms. "Larrick!" I stood on my tippy toes and crushed my lips into his. I'd never been happier to see him.

Larrick broke off the kiss and looked me up and down. “We should go get you cleaned up. You’re all bloody, Red.”

*Bloody Red.* For some reason, I liked the sound of that.

“Yes, Larrick. Let’s go home.” I smiled.

Larrick smiled back, his eyes swimming in happiness as he took my hand and led me into the forest, into my new life.



# **The King's Wizard – Sword in the Stone**

**Lillian MacKenzie Rhine**

\*This Story is an excerpt from the full length novel, The King's Wizard, is written in UK English, and contains adult content. Ages 18+ suggested\*

# Chapter One

Outside was beautiful. Warm and delicious. Arthur loved this time of year when things were in bloom and the world was multiplying before his eyes. The floral aromas of day. The sticky, wet nights under molasses surrounded moons. Yes, spring was definitely, hands down, the best time of year. He so longed to be outside. To walk the gardens. Maybe a dip in the luxurious pond that bordered the castle and the booming village. The village was amazing in spring. Full of life. Blacksmiths working their wares outside. Bakers switching from the sustaining fare of baked breads to succulent fruit pies and sugar-laden pastries. Even the butcher would be taking in the herd for the influx of banquets and balls that the great season brought.

Sure, the castle life was great as well. Servants and any and everything he could wish for. But living the life of a king had its own problems. Of course. Certain things were expected of him. A standard to uphold. Arthur had to admit to himself near daily that he had come into his position of power under what would deem a whim. Frankly, he was lucky. The previous ruler had yet to bear an heir thus making the kingdom vulnerable and up for grabs after his death. To alleviate any confusion and to give any man in the kingdom a chance at keeping the ruling party “in house” so to speak, the magnificent sword, and what some would say slightly magical, Excalibur, was inserted into an enchanted stone.

It was not Arthur’s plan to go up to bat. He didn’t want to take a stab at the competition. He ended up being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Next thing he knew, his small, juvenile palms—sweaty devils that they

were—had ended up around the hilt of the glorious piece of finery that he had seen in his entire life. When it was freed from the stone, Arthur fell backwards under the weight of a weapon that was almost as tall as he was. His first thought in that moment, “Oh crap, what have I done.” In his feeble attempt to place the sword back into the stone, Arthur—exasperated and scared—swallowed the lump of failure as his onlookers watched in awe. Their new king. King Arthur. A part of him shook inside when the crowd—his subjects—bowed. His stomach churned and his heart fluttered. What was he to do? Merely a teen, peasant boy, he had no formal knowledge on ruling a kingdom. How in the hell was he—Arthur—to pull off a feat that was sitting on the cusp of defeat?

Arthur sighed. That was so long ago. Many moons and suns had passed since then. He eventually was mentored. A great wizard had taken him under his wing and reared him to sit on the throne that he occupied in this very moment. His throne. His castle—Camelot. His kingdom—Britain. And what some would say—ruler of the world. But other woes had plagued him over the years. Wars with neighboring lands were not many but some had occurred. Thank goodness his army were pillars of strength. They were always at the ready to take on any force. Sure, Arthur had his non-supporters. Who wouldn’t in his position? He was not a blood heir. Many of the land had to learn him. Get used to his rule. But another issue had arisen in the past year or so that troubled him. His twenty-third year of birth was upon him and his world had shrunk. The same nightmare that he was sure that haunted his predecessor was now his daily threat. Like a cancer, it was something he could not avoid. An heir was needed and he, King Arthur, was not getting any younger as the new world was emerging before his eyes.

To think of an heir was to revel in his prominent, yet personal, issues. Yes, Arthur had tasted the forbidden flesh of the opposite sex. He had no

issue partaking in the carnal sin of fornication, but once his advisor informed him of what he needed to provide to his kingdom, his world had crumbled. Lackadaisical and carefree was his life once he got the hang of things. Sign this. Appear here. Vacations on the countryside. Lavish dinners with outside dignitaries. But now—an heir was needed by Britain. The weight of the stress was enough to knock him off of his feet. To be able to *perform* in a manner of intimacy was just too much to swallow.

Many beautiful ladies of the court had been thrust upon him. One he found on his bed after he had completed a brisk horseback ride through the forest. She was completely nude. Milky thighs spread apart with an interesting smooth, wooden handle in her hand. She was the brightest of blonds. Hair like a bushel of straw. A rare maiden, unlike one he had never seen. Pale. Not in the sick sense. But in the pure sense. She was magnificent. As Arthur happened upon her, he approached his bed, halting only at the foot to watch her display. She took the small handle—about the size of a sword’s hilt—and she place it between her sweet, tenderness. She was swollen and plump like puckered rose buds with the lightest shade of pink that matched the thick morsels sitting atop her heaving bosom. As she rubbed herself, up and down, with the apparatus, she release light breaths that deepened over moments as she hastened her movements.

Arthur licked his lips. He watched her essence appear before him. Filled with desire and hunger for new flesh, the maiden was more than whetting his appetite. She began to fondle at her silky breasts that looked like billows of clouds rumbling over the plains of her chest. Her moans transformed into groans and Arthur was not going to allow himself to stand back and be a mere spectator.

Knowing that it would be a chore to unlace his boots and remove them while watching a woman as exquisite as the blond beauty perched upon his

calfskin bedding, he opted to unlace his trousers instead. Once he freed himself of his cloth restraints, he began quick work on bringing himself to life. As he fisted his flesh, she watched him. Spying his determination. The maiden opened herself wider to him—her king. He so wanted to rule every orifice that she possessed, but something was wrong. With every pump of his hand against his shaft, nothing happened. The life was missing. It remained limper than a stalk in desperate need of water. There was no way he could invade her wet and ready body with his apparent deflation.

“Blasted!” Arthur shouted. Something was wrong. He was broken and in need of repair.

That was the defining day that the greatest mission of Britain’s history began. Not the mission of creating an heir, but the task of stiffening Arthur’s own Excalibur.

# Chapter Two

Many doctors, specialists, and chosen elders had been requested for a showing at Camelot. The king was desperate. He was not too worried about giving Britain what it needed to survive—an heir. Arthur was worried about not being able to lay with a woman any more. The thought of not being able to make a woman scream out. Put her into a senseless state of insanity just from his intrusion. None of that could be accomplished without an erection.

The first hypothesis was that the king was tired. They had finished a small dispute with a neighboring land. Not quite a war, but a battle or two was had. That was it. The king is exhausted the first expert stated. After resting in bed for nearly two weeks nothing happened. He had rested long enough and still could not perform.

“Next!” Arthur blurted for another specialist to be called upon.

“Herbs...medicines,” the ugliest of elder women said in a raspy voice to his advisors.

Everything in Arthur wanted to run for the hills when she entered the room. Short, stumpy, the stench of a thousand motes. Plainly, Arthur did not want any parts of what she was offering. Then he looked down to his crotch and saw no movement. God, he had been blessed with a tool that even soft took two hefty hands to grip and now, it was dead. Arthur looked up to the woman who was wiping a stream of drool from her mouth. She had more gum than teeth. Foul. He motioned for her to bring her potion to the throne. After downing the putrid concoction, Arthur fell into a deep state of hysterics. He was placed in his room as he was not able to care for himself.

Hours of sweats and hallucinations occurred immediately. Then the test. Three of the most taut, wet, and rounded in the right places ladies entered the royal chamber without a stitch of clothing on their desirable bodies. Even though Arthur could not make out specifics, he knew that all three were assaulting him in the most debaucherous manner. Two were making fast work on his problem area. He heard their moans and felt the grips to his flesh. The third was on a separate mission. She hovered over his face, touching of her folds. Droplets of her sweet nectar danced across Arthur's lips as he luxuriated in the carnal event.

Within an hour, the strong potion had run its course. Arthur exhausted from the effects and raw from the rubbing and friction looked to his reddened flesh to see that his shaft still slept.

“Next!”

Once a few more trials ended in error, Arthur found himself in his current state. Wishing that he could be outside. Amongst the booming life that spring brought, but that was not to happen. He was confined to his throne. The throne room would normally be teeming with people. Advisors all the way down to the jester, but at the moment, it was just him and *her*. Arthur didn't know her name—he never did know any of the maidens' names. Honestly, he did not even know what she looked like. Was she beautiful? Tall? Short? All those things over time had become inconsequential. He was willing to near defile a wart-faced, three-legged witch if it meant he could harden.

This particular lady, wench, maiden...whatever she was...was positioned in his lap. Specifically, her head was in his lap. Her mouth, wet and vibrant with movement was in his lap—on his shaft. She had been there for almost an hour. It used to be a time when Arthur loved to be sucked and licked. His head tickled by a wet tongue and his balls sucked while he shot

his cream into a waiting mouth, face, breast, or even hair. Hair. He loved to run his fingers on a lover's scalp. To grip at the root. To hear a high-pitched, yet muffled yelp while he shoved more of his shaft down her throat. But, now...now, he was bored with it all.

Arthur watched her for a few moments more. Definitely a master at what she was doing. As far as he knew, his team had searched a few lands over just to bring her in, hoping to complete the mission. Her tendrils were pinned to her head in several loops and links of braids. Her robes were of a bright, colorful nature. Nothing like the drab inhabitants of Britain. No. She definitely wasn't of their land. This woman was *exotic*. In the past, Arthur would have been chomping at the bit to bed her. Willing to take her outside of his private chambers and touch and feel her exquisite mouth and tongue anywhere at any time. That...was the past.

Her head bobbed up and down. Slackening his shaft with her endless amount of saliva. He could definitely feel her warmth. See her expertise in the act. A rarity amongst his previous conquests. This woman did not use her hands to grip at him. A plus. Less chaffing and rawness. It was also the single reason he had allowed her to continue on in her attempt to pleasure him for over the usual time when he would cut a maiden off. He was studying her. Taking mental note on her performance. A part of him believed that his problems would not last. He would eventually harden. And when he did, the first maiden he bedded, would suck his cock in a manner that this exotic, feminine creature did.

Arthur yawned. He was tired. Sick of failed attempts. "I'm done. Thank you, miss."

Just like that, she released his limpness from her oral depths and she stood. God she was magnificent. Curvy, olive tinted skin, hair the color of night. Even Arthur gulped with intensity at her rare beauty. It was if she had



a glow to her. However, there was no need to prolong her visit to Camelot. No need for her.

“You may return to your land.”

She bowed to him then she walked out of the throne room, leaving him to his own thoughts. His birthday was only a week away and he had wasted a year trying to fix his problem. No one else was on the list to aide in his plight. Arthur needed something to happen and soon. Even though spring was a happy time amongst his people, the British were not opposed to uprising and revolt. When Excalibur was implanted in the stone the first time, not many were too pleased especially when they witnessed the outcome. *A boy king*. So going that route again was not going to work. He had to bring an heir, but how? Arthur looked to the right of his throne. On a small table, there was his usual bowl of seasonal fruits, a bowl of water for cleansing, and a small saucer with a tiny bell sitting on top. Engraved onto one of the handle's side, it read, “*ring me.*” On the opposite side, “*when needed.*”

Arthur groaned then rolled his eyes. He had made a promise to himself to never call upon *him*. He picked up the brass bell and held it in his hands. He repeated in his mind, *there's nothing else I can do*. It was a last resort. The final straw. Arthur carefully held onto the handle not sure of exactly what was going to happen and then he gently flicked his wrist. After the first sound of the clapper hitting the metal of the bell, a thunderous gust of wind flooded the throne room. Tapestries and paintings blew from the walls, papers were thrown about. Even Arthur shifted in his seat once a dark, ominous cloud entered the room through a nearby window.

Arthur hurriedly placed the bell back on the table as to stop the action, but it was too late. The blackness filled the room. The smell of smoldering cinder scorched his nose. Hot death was approaching and Arthur did not

know whether to run, call for help, or stay put. His skin prickled from the rising fright that inched up his core then he heard it. More importantly, Arthur heard *him*. It started as a hum, and then thickened into a rattle, a drumming of his throat. Each bellow of his deep rumble filled the expanse of the room until his laughter turned into a haunting cackle.

“*Merlin?*” Arthur murmured not even realizing that the name had escaped his mouth.

Once his lips snapped shut, the cloud sucked from the room. The artwork...the disorder...back in *order*. Arthur sat up on his throne, eyes frantically looking about for any evidence of an invasion by the man—the wizard—who had made most of his developing years a misery. Instead, sitting on the windowsill was a bird that peered about the room. But this was not any ordinary bird, but a beautiful, majestic owl. The purest of whites with only a slight line of black that outlined its face into a heart shape. His eyes sparkled like diamonds, but his claws gripped the edge of the sill causing the wood to moan into a splinter. This was no nice bird. He was rare and deadly. Not because of the species type, but because of the owner.

“Archimedes?”

Again, Arthur did not realize that he’d uttered the name until after it was spoken.

*You called?* Archimedes could not outright speak through his beak like humans with their lips, but he did more than communicate. He was downright incessant at times. *Is there an issue? The master is very busy and only to be summoned when emergent. You are not to abuse the bell.*

“Eh,” was all that Arthur could muster. Nervous tension had taken hold of his tongue preventing his words.

*Speak child. Arthur?*

With him being the king, his subjects were to refer to him as such. But that only applied to those who fell under his jurisdiction. Archimedes was not his subject. Merlin was his master and Merlin did not reside under any jurisdiction but his own.

Archimedes flew to the throne. Twice the size of a normal owl, his eyes met Arthur's then he traveled his gaze down Arthur's body, presumably looking for injury. He twitched his head then hummed in acceptance as he moved his sights to the next section. Archimedes glared at Arthur's limp, exposed flesh for a few moments.

*Mhm.* With that, Archimedes jumped back off of the throne back to the window. He turned his head a near three hundred and sixty degrees to glare back at Arthur then the owl faced toward the open window and took flight. Arthur quickly tucked himself back into his trousers and ran to the window only to see the sparse clouds in the picture perfect sky. The doors flew open to the chamber and in walked one of his advisors.

"Are you alright, your highness? We feared you were in trouble."

Arthur glared back at them. Not many in Britain or Camelot believed in the power of sorcery and witchcraft or even that their king's transition had been a result of the power of magic. So talk of Merlin was hush, hush.

"I'm fine, Lance. I just need some rest."

"Yes, your highness. I will have the servants prepare your chamber for your slumber."

The two men exchanged nods, and again, Arthur was left in the same way that he started. Looking out the window at the remarkable sky. He did not know what was to come. He was not sure if his affliction was emergent enough for Merlin's expertise. As he spied his unmoving crotch, he said, "I sure as Hades hope so."

# Chapter Three

Arthur retreated to his chamber early that evening. Normally, he would take a trot through the fields and nod at some of his subjects. Diplomacy was always a part of each day, but after witnessing the wizardry of Merlin—the visit from Archimedes—Arthur was spent. After having a light meal and discussing matters of the kingdom with his lead advisor, he turned in for the night. And what a splendid night it was.

All the window openings were left unlatched so he could experience the sweet aroma of night. Most people feared the night due to “evils” like Merlin, but Arthur loved it. It was the only time when Britain slept. And when Britain slumbered, Camelot did the same. All this meant that he was no longer a king fighting wars, making orders, stressing over heirs. No. He was only Arthur in a grand room that he never could have imagined when he was a younger, destitute child in the filthy grime of Britain’s streets.

A smile spread on Arthur’s face as he pulled up his fur-lined pelt, burrowing himself deeper into his bed. It was time for his personal peace.

*“Smiling already? We have yet to fix the issue.”*

Arthur jumped, erect in his bed with the terror that Merlin was in his chamber. But when he inventoried his room, everything seemed unfamiliar. For one, it was extremely miniscule, barely large enough to hold his monstrous bed. There was no fireplace and only a small table and wooden chair were present in a corner sandwiched between two windows. Even though he was not in his bed chambers, possibly not in the castle at all, the thing that frightened him the most was it was no longer night. It was light as

day outside and he had only shut his eyes before he heard Merlin's haunting voice.

Arthur heard the loud pop of two fingers snapping and his bed shrank to half its size. After scrambling to the top of the bed, Arthur witnessed the wizard enter through a door that seemed to appear out of thin air.

Merlin was a very dominant presence. Taller than any man he had ever seen. Bronze tinted skin as if he had been out in the sun all his life. Onyx hair that he kept bundled in a tie that hung loosely down his back. If Arthur had to guess, Merlin's hair probably reached past his hip. Always present in black leather and bindings, he looked like an executioner ready to deliver a sentence. He had on black boots that rose to a stop at a fashionable silver plate right at the knee. His legs, not as thin as he remembered, were concealed by leather pants with his black, billowy shirt carefully tucked in. There was a strap that crossed his chest that held his sword that hung tight to his left hip. Arthur could not understand for the life of him why Merlin carried around the weapon when he could easily kill an assailant with a simple clap of his hands. Boasting to be more than a thousand years old, his youthful features made him appear close to his early thirties, late twenties.

"I sense you have a few questions for me." Merlin's voice always sent a chill up Arthur's spine. It made him want to think twice before he chose his words. The last thing he wanted to do was say the wrong thing.

"How did I get here?" Arthur asked then gulped. For some odd reason, he knew that was a stupid question to lead with.

The wizard started to pace around the room, his shadow seemed to lengthen instead of follow him as he walked. The magic and oddities had begun.

"How did you get here?" Merlin chuckled. *Yeah, stupid question.* "I think you know the answer to that question. I will not answer to or about

anything as trivial as to why or how you got somewhere. Anything else you want to ask? And do use your brains this time, *Runt*.”

Arthur grimaced when he heard the appellation. Runt was the nickname that Merlin bestowed on him during their training. He always laughed at Arthur making him feel less than a man. Calling him a *runt* like he was part of some litter of animals. After taking a deep breath, Arthur increased his courage, searching for the right question. And he was to deliver. Merlin required a question that he would get or there would be hell to pay.

“What happens now?”

Merlin chuckled. “Good. Very good.” Arthur felt his chest swell with pride. He had done something right. “You must bathe...the day is getting old.”

*Bathe? Day getting old?* Arthur glanced out of one of the windows from his position on the bed and his breath caught in his chest. The deep orange of a setting sun was starting to emerge. *What in the hell? I just got here.*

“Stop trying to figure everything out, Runt. You are in my realm and things happen when *I* want them to. Simple.” Without allowing Arthur to digest his comment, Merlin snapped his fingers and Arthur, still dressed in his bed garments stood in a different room. It was filled with steam that tickled at his nose and smelled of fragrant oils. Under his bare feet, the floor was warm unlike the cool flooring in the bath chamber in Camelot. The walls seemed to be made of stone, but Arthur could not make out the definite material due to the darkness of the chamber. There was only one fire torch affixed to a wall that gave the entire room a light orange tint to the gray smoke. Merlin also seemed to have vanished.

“*Archimedes!*” Merlin’s voice boomed then echoed until a tall man appeared before Arthur. Not as tall as Merlin, but definitely a foot higher than Arthur. He was shirtless. His brawny torso was well-defined, showing

the ripple of his abs, thick expanse of his chest, and musculature of his shoulders and arms. His hair was short, stark white and spiked. His eyes the color of the finest silver that sparkled so brightly, Arthur could have sworn they looked like...*diamonds?*

“Archimedes?” The man that Arthur knew as the grand owl and servant to Merlin was not a bird or animal, but a *man*.

“The master wants you to bathe and I will assist in that.”

Arthur’s first reaction was to shy away, even protest. He had never had a man bathe him before. Touch his flesh. His *naked* flesh. But he knew that if he was not compliant, he would not hear the end of it. And, again, he would have to deal with Merlin’s wrath.

Arthur quivered with apprehension as Archimedes lifted Arthur’s bed gown from his body. Standing there before Merlin’s assistant while disrobed was unnerving. It did not help that Archimedes was known to be a chatter box, but in his human form he was eerily quiet and mysterious.

With a hand to Arthur’s back, Archimedes guided him to the steamy waters of what appeared to be a large cauldron. *Oh, Hades no! Merlin is planning on cooking me into a stew of some sort.*

“*Get in the water, Runt!*”

Merlin’s voice cracked into the tranquil moment like a storm thundering over the hills. Arthur scampered into the liquid, grimacing as he felt the scalding heat kiss his flesh.

“Shit,” Arthur yelped as he eased into the liquid fire that stopped at his chest when he was submerged and seated.

Archimedes took a cloth that smelled of honey and spice and dipped it into the water. Once it was wet, Archimedes placed the hot cloth over Arthur’s face and eyes. Without having sight, Arthur was left to the mercy of the man before him. He felt another cloth touch his chest as Archimedes

began to bathe him. Considering Arthur was under a tremendous amount of stress, he put up a valiant effort to be stiff and uncomfortable, but eventually he relaxed and leaned back against the cauldron wall.

Arthur listened to the deliberate swishing of the water as he felt droplets of fragrant liquid sprinkle against his chest. He began to groan from the sensation of being touched. Caressed. Even if it were with a man. Archimedes mopped the cloth over Arthur's abs. Even though Arthur was not much of a fighter, he did spar on a weekly basis. His body was trim and fit. Adored by many. Many kings of the time, although near warlords, were frumpy and old. Not Arthur—the young king. His straight cinnamon hair was cut short only stopping short of his ears. His shoulders were broad and his torso had little to no body fat. Due to his constant riding of horse for pleasure, his thighs were thick and his height was intimidating by some.

Arthur felt the grip of Archimedes travel up his inner thighs. Arthur's lips parted in yet another failed attempt to stifle his hum of pleasure. Then he felt the same touch of Archimedes on his shaft. He tickled his fingers against length in a dance of delight. *Oh, no.* Arthur's nipples perked, heating on the edge of gratification. When Archimedes began to swirl the pads of his fingertips against the tip of Arthur's manhood, Arthur began to pant uncontrollably. He did not know what was coming over him. Fire filled his veins. The heat was overpowering. Arthur found it difficult to hold back any longer. Before he could stop himself, he closed his eyes tight and grunted as his inner cream filled the hot water. It was like his shaft was a cannon unloading. It nearly knocked the air from his lungs.

"Oh, heavens me," Arthur voiced, his appetite whet for more of the glorious sensation. *What? He yearned for...more?* Arthur panted and tried to catch his breath from his release. His mind was in a whirlwind. It had been almost a year since he had experienced something so delicious as what



*Archimedes* had done to him. *A man? How could it be?* Once he lifted the veil of the damp cloth, *Archimedes* was gone. Replaced by...*Merlin*.

The wizard began to clap in a languid manner.

“Bravo, Runt. Bravo!”

With another snap of *Merlin*’s fingers, Arthur found himself back in his bed in the unassuming room. It was night and he was confused beyond belief. A tray of sliced venison and grains was placed at the foot of the bed, but Arthur had no appetite. So much had happened in only a matter of hours. From the original sight of *Archimedes* as the owl that he was accustomed to right down to the view of his manlike form. A man that had made him react in a way that Arthur almost believed to be extinct. Simply, Arthur was terrified. Yet, that was his normal reaction while being near to *Merlin*—terror.

He nestled into his bed with thoughts of their first few adventures while Arthur was in transition as the new king of Britain. First up was etiquette which included everything from manners to dialogue to posture. Whenever Arthur would complete something in error, *Merlin* would swat Arthur’s bottom with a riding crop that he kept attached to his hip, just under his sword scabbard. It took some time for Arthur to adjust to his new life of finery. Not eating with his hands. Not slouching. Using perfect dialect, even learning new languages such as Greek. It was all overwhelming, but he could not quit or face the consequences. He felt backed into a corner then, and now, there was nowhere to go as well.

The only thing that gave him cause for elation was the memory of spilling his seed inside of the cauldron. Arthur could only think that he was cured. Within moments of arrival nonetheless. The conundrum, though, he was still in *Merlin*’s realm. Not returned to Camelot. Was there more to do? Did he need to consummate his victory?

“Eat, Runt!”

Arthur yelped at Merlin’s evocative voice.

“You will need your strength at daybreak.”

With that, the room became eerily silent. Mute. The blackness of a naked sky void of stars watched him through unmasked windows. His journey was not finished. He was not cured.

Arthur sat up on his elbow and pulled the tray closer to him as he picked at the delicious meat and season grain. Before he knew it, he had finished the entire portion and felt the heaviness of a full belly and welcome sleep.

# Chapter Four

Arthur fluttered his eyes open after what seemed to be a few seconds of sleep. The birds were singing and the sky was kissed with the pink lips of the heavens. Merlin's land was infinite meaning that time did not exist. Days and nights were only an illusion so Arthur was not sure if he had slept the night away. One thing was certain, Arthur felt more than rested. He would have thought he slumbered for days in just a blink of an eye. Merlin had that kind of control.

*\*Snap\**

Arthur found himself in a moderately sized chamber. Nothing was in it but a long rectangular table that sat in front of two windows. Next to the table was a wooden chair that was void of armrests just a back, the seat, and four legs. Nothing spectacular there.

Arthur looked down and he was dressed in garbs not like his norm. Similar leather pants and boots as Archimedes had worn the day before. He too was missing a shirt, but he had two hide straps that criss-crossed over his chest. The straps themselves had metal loops traversing the material. Arthur was questioning his attire when he felt a cool gust approach him from behind. When he turned, only a breadth away, there stood the powerful wizard with an ominous grin on his face. Arthur's breath caught in his lungs, but he dared not make a peep.

"You look quite rested," Merlin drawled with a slight hiss at the end. It was that final hiss in his words that seemed to crawl up Arthur's spine. The terror that most would flee from stood before him in the flesh.

Merlin walked around Arthur while Arthur eagerly followed the magnificent man with his timid gaze. Merlin had his hands crossed at the small of his back as he glided toward the table. With the faint fanning of his fingers, a large, high-back, upholstered chair appeared to the rear of the table. The chair as if knowing who it was meant for, slowly pivoted in the direction of Merlin like a turning dial. Merlin took a seat then the chair languorously rotated to face the table again.

The wizard crossed his legs, leisurely at best. Arthur could feel Merlin watching him. Boring holes into him. Like he was as limpid as water. The wizard cocked his head in deep study.

“So, Runt, are you ready for your first lesson? Do you have any questions before we get started?”

“Eh, I thought I was cured,” Arthur stated with a timorous tremble to his voice.

“No. You simply had a preliminary test.” Merlin glanced down at Arthur’s pants.

He could feel his thighs smolder in reaction to whatever the sorcerer was doing.

“I had to make sure...all of your parts...were in working order.”

“So, I didn’t harden? How was I able to—”

“No need for insignificant questions. It’s time to start.” Yet another *dumb* question was asked of the almighty Merlin. *Fuck.*

*\*Snap\**

Within a flash, the once empty wooden chair was filled. A maiden—no—a woman of profound experience sat before him and her master. Hair as black as a winter’s night, cascaded down her breasts. Ample mounds of pallid flesh with blush hued nipples sitting atop. Her bosom was rising and falling in rapid succession. She was in need. Wanton. Heated. Her oval face

with plump, rosy cheeks had a covering over her eyes to conceal her sight. She began to writhe and thrust about on the chair like an animal in heat. Her supple thighs spread apart as she curled her bare feet inward. Her mons was completely absent of hair, making Arthur gasp. He had never seen such a sight in his life.

*\*Snap\**

Arthur was on all fours like a horse. His eyes, too, were shielded. Arthur knew he was still in the same room due to the exotic grumbles of the woman sitting in the chair. But being without sight was putting him in a panic. Within moments the room quieted, no more moans, no more panting. Deathly silence.

“Runt, I have a challenge for you.”

Arthur gulped.

“While you are in my charge, in my realm, you are to refer to me as master, as all my subjects do. Understood,” Merlin hissed.

“Yes.”

Arthur felt the searing burn of the riding crop to his rear. Even through thick pants, it left a sizzling ache. *Shit, that was a wrong answer.*

“Yes...*master*,” Arthur corrected and braced himself for more pain. Nothing.

“Good, now for your task.” Even though Arthur did not hear Merlin rise from his seat, Arthur could feel the movement of the air, the clapping of his boots to the hard floor. Merlin was circling him. And Arthur was on edge.

“Our beautiful friend is a maiden to a very prominent goddess so we shall treat her well. She has never encountered the flesh of a man. No one has broached her purity. As you have wondered, she is under a deep spell with a catch. Her body heat is rising, even as I speak. Your task and the only

thing that can save her is to bring her to climax. Runt, you are to copulate our guest.”

“How should I do that, master?” Arthur asked as he heard the scraping of Merlin’s chair against the stone floor. “I can’t see her or harden.”

Merlin rumbled with laughter. “It’s simple, Runt, use your many talents of pleasure. Now with haste, make her scream. This is life...and...death.”

*Shit.*

Arthur stayed planted on all fours trying to devise a strategic plan. Wars, battles, and anything called of a ruler, he had been trained and knowledgeable but his current task was proving a mighty challenge. He felt like eons had passed, but he remembered there was no such thing as time in the magical realm. However, that did not do anything to calm his nerves.

*Okay, Arthur; think, he said to himself. I have to make her come with haste. Life and death. But how? I can’t use my cock, that’s for sure. That leaves fingers and tongue. Tongue. That’s the show, good king.*

Arthur felt great about his choice of tool for use, but his plan was non-existent. There was an alluring maiden sitting only a stone’s throw away. Supple. Delicious. Craving. But she was in danger. Only so much heat could be applied to a person or it would end in disaster. It was imperative that he got to her. How? It was a very daunting question.

“Time is of the essence. I would hate to have to deliver bad news to her goddess if she perishes under *your* care, Runt.”

*Me? How can this be blamed on me?* His mind was like mush and the wizard was taunting him.

Arthur began to crawl forward. He was not sure if Merlin had altered his position in the room just to toy with him, but after moving forward for a moment, something changed in his heightened senses. His nose picked up a scent. It was faint, but it smelled of flowers in bloom. Pure and innocent.

*Unbroached.* Arthur was in the right direction so he surged forward with urgency.

Once his face collided with her knee, Arthur took a moment to sneer in pain then he got to work. He brushed his cheek up against the feverish thighs of the maiden. She continued to contort with need. Her floral scent increase. *The musk of this woman is intoxicating*, Arthur thought.

His nose was the first thing to hit pay dirt. Her clitoris was a hardened nub. Extended enough for him to tickle it with his lips. She was already moist and ready. Arthur sat back on his haunches and sucked her stimulated flesh into his mouth with unabashed fervor. He suckled on her clit like a tit to a child. Even though she was stone quiet, Arthur could not contain his own moans of pleasure.

He wanted to savor the moment. Be one with her. Take his time. *Time is of the essence* echoed in his mind. He had to save her. Arthur parted her lips and dove his tongue deep into her depths. Like the sweetest of summer fruits she was filling him with her nectar, but it was not enough. He needed her cup to runneth over. The only way to complete the task was with a climax.

The maiden, still able to move even though mute, was bucking against him. Thrusting closer to his mouth. It was as if she wanted him to eat her alive. Sweet and untouched. Arthur could not sway his delight in pleasing her. Pleasing her? That was a new notion. He was the king. His subjects were to make life splendid for *him*. Now his task was to please another. That was it. Give onto others and maybe he will be cured from his terrible affliction.

Arthur sucked and licked into her tightness. Her slit was so liquefied that he was finding it difficult to keep a hold to her nub. Arthur inserted a finger into her. Feeling her snugness. She conformed to him. Then she

almost levitated from the chair when she grabbed hold of his hair. With one final push against his finger, Arthur removed the intrusion and planted his tongue in the path of her undammed river.

Her scream was loud. Painstakingly audible. Grunts like a dying fox. Howls like a wolf. She stood causing Arthur to sit back further. It was no way in Hades that he was leaving her hot chasm void while it came. Drowning him with sweet suffocation. If it were his final breath...he was right where he needed to be.

*\*Snap\**

Arthur fumbled forward into the chair. His eyes uncovered. The exotic virgin...gone. He was panting. Eyes watering because he had seen the heavens. Liquid gold she was. Instinctively, he wiped at his mouth for one last sip of her fruit. But there was nothing. Nothing at all. He was dry as a whistle. Left in dread to wonder if what happened had truly...happened. Then the deliberate claps of Merlin snapped him out of his daze.

Sitting in his chair, legs crossed, evil expression, Merlin smiled at Arthur with more than a glint. He was pleased. Proud even. What happened did in fact occur.

“Bravo, Runt, bravo!”



# Chapter Five

After resting for a few moments, Arthur sat upright in his bed. His biggest wonder was why did he remain in the castle of Merlin the wizard. Up until that point, he had passed all of Merlin's tests, so why was he still there? Arthur thought back on his life thinking that life in itself was the largest, incomplete test. He had not asked for his current situation. If he could go back and question teenage Arthur—pre-royalty Arthur—about his future life and what would have become of him; he probably would have said married with a small plot of land for farming. It was just that simple. A life of simplicity, a wife, and children. Arthur sighed. Yes, there would be children, he hoped, however at the current moment that word “child” was something more than offspring. It meant a new heir. A future king. A life not of his choosing. *It almost seems unfair*, Arthur thought.

“Nothing in life is truly fair. Life, itself, is a cruel thing to live through.”

Not to Arthur's surprise, Merlin appeared in his chamber.

“Why am I still here?” Arthur mustered up the balls to ask of Merlin.

“Like I say, life is a cruel cunt of a bitch to muscle through. Sickness, wars, famine, love, loss, sex, and,” Merlin drawled on the word and then looked to Arthur, “its complications are all far too much for one man to handle. But we live. And handle all that is broached.”

Merlin paused his pace then turned on a dime at the foot of Arthur's bed. His glare was questioning just as Arthur was seeking an answer from Merlin. “Why *are* you here, Runt?”

“That's what I asked of you,” Arthur stated incredulous.

“Only I ask the questions. When I find my answers so shall you. So, why are you here?”

“I required your help—”

“For?” Merlin interrupted.

“Well with my situation,” Arthur fired back. His annoyance was starting to peak.

“And,” Merlin drawled, “what *situation* is that?”

When Merlin started to hiss his words, Arthur knew that he was being quizzed and if he knew better and valued his existence, the answer better be correct. The odd thing about it all was the fact that in the end, he would actually be answering his own original question of why he remained in Merlin’s realm.

“My cock won’t harden so I can’t produce an heir.” Arthur was becoming nervous because he knew that answer was not going to be the end of the discussion. *Why, oh why, did I wake early with these ponderings?*

“So you need an heir? I can conjure you an heir then all would be solved. The kingdom will live on!” Merlin’s voice boomed through the room and probably the entire castle as if he was making a major declaration.

“No...it’s not that simple...master.” Arthur was still getting used to the title.

“Why is it not? I am a powerful wizard, actually the strongest in the world. I can make anything happen.”

“I can’t have you zap a baby into my arms—”

“Can’t...won’t...don’t?” Merlin chimed.

“I don’t want you to...I mean...I want to do it on my own. The natural way. Plus the end result won’t fix the initial issue.”

“And why can’t you?”

“Again, my cock won’t harden, therefore, I cannot produce an heir.”

Merlin began to pace again while rubbing at his chin in presumed deep thought. With the fanning of his fingers, a wand about the length of a sword appeared. Merlin was not much for the stereotypical garbs and tools of his trade—wizardry—however, he did, on rare occasions, utilize a wand mostly for fine-tuned direction of his magic.

He faced Arthur again and with a quick swirl of the wand Arthur’s bedding *and* bed clothes had vanished.

Arthur hunched up toward the wall of the bed. His legs were gaped and he did not know whether to cover himself or just let it all be. Before he could determine the best course, Merlin reached forward and tapped the wand on Arthur’s shaft. A tingling feeling soared through his vessels like pin pricks of hot lava. The surge started faintly from his head then worked its way over his chest right to his loins. Hot delicious heat radiated from within, itching its way up to the tip of penile flesh. Then like the rising of a flag, his staff, his scepter, *Excalibur* turned to stone.

“My cock...my cock...my fucking, bloody dick is hard as bloody stone! Woo hoo!” Arthur was bouncing on his bed in ecstatic glee. “I’m cured... I’m cured!” Stiff as cured sausage, Arthur was hard and standing tall. Fixed. Uninjured and ready to work. It was the greatest celebration of his life. Camelot was nothing. Winning battles...nothing. But producing the most beautiful hard-on of his existence was the greatest accomplishment ever.

Arthur was so distracted with thoughts of finally leaving the horrendously torturous realm of Merlin because he no longer had a problem to solve that he did not notice Merlin’s sinister grumble that turned into a diabolical laugh.

*\*Snap\**

Gone. It was gone. Soft. Limp. Void of life. His hardness that was ready to impale a harem of viable ladies in waiting had vanished.

“Now, back to our original conversation. Life is *hard*. Sometimes we don’t know our true failures outside of the glow of success.”

“My cock is gone,” Arthur murmur toward his lap. It was mournful to see it go. Victory was snatched away in a quick breath. Yes, failure. He had failed not only himself, but his people. Britain.

“Don’t be doltish, Runt.” Merlin began to glide around the room again. Just as his erection, the wand had vanished, and Merlin was about to deliver the meaning in the lesson. There was always some type of small punishment that he handed down in order for Arthur to grasp the moral. This time, his erection and overall sanity had suffered.

“I will assure you that you have all of your working parts still attached.” Merlin gave Arthur a quick once over with his cold glare. “What you saw was pure magic. You...did nothing to produce what you *thought* was the cure to your ailment.”

Merlin moved about the room again. Arthur found himself at a loss for words. His world had been shattered. Hell, he felt as if he was back, many years in the ghastly past. Only days away from begging in the streets he was. A peasant. A pauper. There were no dreams of grandeur. Just life. Hard, gruesome, wretched *life*.

“What we have here, Runt, is a quandary with no foreseeable resolution without one vital key.” Merlin faced Arthur. “You.”

“Me?”

“You, Runt, are blinded by your success. An ill-gotten triumph that, let’s face it, any man could have achieved. But that is all a moot point. What I’m trying to illustrate here is...just as a celebration received with a mere erection that was *ill-gotten*, you forgot the original issue of...*why*. *Why* are

you here? *What* is your problem? *How* did it occur?” Merlin quirked an eyebrow at Arthur. *Oh, shit, time to answer.*

“I can’t—”

“Ah, ah, ah...why, what, and most importantly, how?”

Arthur dropped his head. Being with Merlin, learning from his unorthodox methods, were draining at best. “I am required to perform again. I’m always required to do something or another for the people. Supposed to be *my* people as I am *their* king. But the tables are always turned. *They are* the true king and ruler where *I am* the servant, the populace, *the people.*”

Merlin sucked at his teeth then a grin spread across his face. In the darkness of a false night, Arthur focused on Merlin’s lips and bright teeth while the rest of Merlin’s body faded into the shroud. Arthur had succeeded in answering not only Merlin’s question but his own. Even though he had passed all the preliminary tests and even shown that he did, in fact, possess the ability to harden, he remained in Merlin’s realm because the problematic issue had yet to be solved. Why? Because up until that point, Arthur did not know the true complication. Why, what, how. It was the pressure. The stress and strain of trying to please a society that he did not feel was his own. His truth. His legacy, whatever that was, was not yet fulfilled because his life was on a false path. Just as younger, non-noble Arthur, he had yet to actually own his station in life. He was a false king. A mirage of a ruler. It was time for that to change. And only in that alteration would he be able to repair whatever was broken and truly succeed.

“Grand, Runt. You have figured out the predicament so now we shall work on the solution.”

*\*Snap\**

“Now for a bit of good, old-fashioned merriment.”

## Contributors

**Zoe Adams:** Zoe Adams is a graduate of Professional Writing, at The Grimsby Institute, through the University of Hull. She has always had an interest of horror, science-fiction, and other media. She has been writing professionally since 200, whereupon she first started her course, and has continued to push for a career since. Her novella, *Best Served Chilled*, was accepted by Crushing Hearts and Black Butterfly Publishing in January 2013.

**Cecilia Clark:** Cecilia Clark is a multi genre writer with short stories in thirty anthologies, some published, some pending and flash fiction in ezines, She sharpens her pen on 25 word or less competitions and wins every one she enters gaining prizes from pianos to movie tickets. Cecilia also has art in the published works of other writers. Her first love is fairy tales closely followed by SF, steam punk and fantasy though her tastes are eclectic and unlimited. She has dabbled in writing horror and crime fiction and is currently working on several projects involving both. She can be found at the usual e-hangouts.

**K.C. Finn-** K. C. Finn was born and raised in Cardiff, South Wales, where her love for storytelling grew at a precociously young age. After developing the medical condition M.E. / C.F.S., Kim turned to writing to escape the pressures of disabled living, only to become hooked on the incredible world of publishing.

**Nicole Daffurn:** Nicole's love for the written word has seen her write many short stories and poems and then eventually moving on to tackle the

bigger task of novel writing late in 2011. She has also completed her course in editing and is currently studying Journalism and looks forward to exploring the world of news media.

**Leah D.W.:** Leah D.W. lives in South Africa with her family and two beloved dogs. She was first published at the age of 21 and has several short stories in anthologies, two poems and loves to write paranormal romance novels. A proud bookworm and chocoholic, Leah is also pursuing a career in editing and loves to study Greek Mythology. When she isn't writing like a mad woman high on coffee, she spends time with her friends usually drifting through bookstores and watching movies.

**Jade Heart:** Jade Heart loves stormy nights, loud music, and stories about lust and desire, which is why she writes adult and erotic romance.

**Jeannette Joyal:** Jeannette Joyal lives in North Carolina with her husband for the last 14 years. A proud mother of four daughters, one son and has also been blessed with six beautiful granddaughters who are the light of her life. She works for Hot Ink Press as Head of Strategic Marketing. She has recently tried her hand at writing and has completed a couple of poems. Both have now been published with Crushing Hearts. This has given her the encouragement to write some short stories.

**Samantha Ketteman:** Samantha Ketteman has resided in southern Illinois for 7 years, (though still claims to be an Alabama girl), with her husband and three crazy demon children. She started reading novels at a very young age and decided to write for herself. She is a caffeine addict, insomniac, and generally scatterbrained most of the time. When she's not

writing, she's getting lost in her imagination. Novels are an escape from the harsh reality of a cantankerous teenage boy and two drama queen girls.

**Victoria Kinnaird:** Victoria Kinnaird is 27 years old and lives in Glasgow, Scotland. She graduated from the University of Strathclyde in 2009 with a Bachelor of the Arts degree in Journalism, Creative Writing and English Lit. Victoria has been writing since she was 15 years old. She loves rock music, and 11 of her tattoos are related to bands that she loves!

**Sinead MacDughlas:** Sinead MacDughlas will tell you she breathes music and bleeds words. Those who know her well, will tell you that those words are likely highly caffeinated. Born and raised in Ontario, Sin is a proud Canadian whose plots often take place in her home province. She now lives in a small town, north of Toronto, with her hard-working husband, two children, and a black, medium-haired cat who thinks she is his pet. Sinead loves to receive feedback from her readers, and encourages them to seek her out on any of her social profiles.

**Stephen T. De Marino:** Stephen T. De Marino was raised by a hippie and an attack pilot, which may explain his chaotic nature. A football coach for 25 years, he now exploring his softer side. Currently living in the wilds of Northern California (Yes, the REAL Northern California, not SF) he is working on his first full length novel which he promised his darling wife that he would one day finish. (There have been many, many false starts.) He has been published in 13 Tales of the Paranormal, Gridiron Strategies, American Football Monthly, and several poetry e-zines under the pen name Kakavian.

**Lexi Ostrow:** Lexi has been a writer ever since the second grade in some form or another. Getting her degree in creative writing and her



master's in journalism she couldn't wait to get a chance to put her fantasies down on paper. Her debut novel, *Torn Between Two Worlds* is something that was simmering in her mind since middle school and she's so grateful to put it out into the literary world. From paranormal romance to thriller there isn't a genre she doesn't love to spend her time reading or writing.

**Jennifer Raygoza:** Jennifer Raygoza lives in Corona, California with her husband and children. She developed a love for writing poetry at the young age of twelve. She did not want to become a writer when she was young. She had dreams of becoming a Marriage Counselor and majored in Psychology when she was older. Although that dream did not work out she still councils relationship advice to friends and family. In 2013 she published her first book called *The Guardians*. Originally it was a story written for fun, and out of curiosity was self published.

**Lillian MacKenzie Rhine:** Lillian MacKenzie Rhine ("Lilly Mac") writes in several genres ranging from paranormal to historical. She believes that the possibilities of creation should not be limited to just one category, but one should allow the story and characters to dictate where the journey leads. Being a beta reader for several years has allowed her to write her material with the reader in mind which gives her books a more realistic and relatable approach.

**Pyxi Rose:** Pyxi Rose is a single mom, writer, lover of all things literary. She lives in the PA Mountains, but her heart and soul will always be in North Carolina. She has a wonderfully weird little boy named Wander Stone that keeps her on her toes. She has a few series out like *The Taghairm Chronicles*, a darker paranormal series about Scottish Oracles and a NA

fantasy trilogy called Saving Babylon which is a little more adult and it focuses on angels/demons.

**Andrea L. Staum:** Andrea L. Staum is author of the Dragonchild Lore series and The Attic's Secret Novella. She is also a contributor to a wide variety of anthologies in numerous genres. She is a trained motorcycle mechanic, an amateur house renovator, and a record keeper for the characters in her mind. She resides in South Central Wisconsin with her husband and three cats.

**Catherine Stovall:** Catherine Stovall is the author of many fiction works in the horror, steampunk, paranormal, fantasy, dark fantasy, and YA genres. She is also the editor and a contributor to several anthologies produced by Crushing Hearts and Black Butterfly Publishing, Vamptasy Publishing, and Steamworks Ink.

Catherine is a fearless creature who surrounds herself with the joys of life both in and out of her fictional worlds. She lives in Southeast Missouri with her husband, three children, and pets. When not writing, she spends her time riding motorcycles, wearing elaborate hats, and genuinely enjoying the oddities in life.

**N.C. Thomas:** Born and bred in Glasgow, Scotland N C's two passions are reading and writing. She has a Master of the Arts Degree in Classics which makes her qualified to go to the cinema to see movies related to her degree and say things like "No, that is not what happened at all!" and, with a deep sigh, "Wow my degree really is cool..." Books are her passion and she vows there is not a genre.